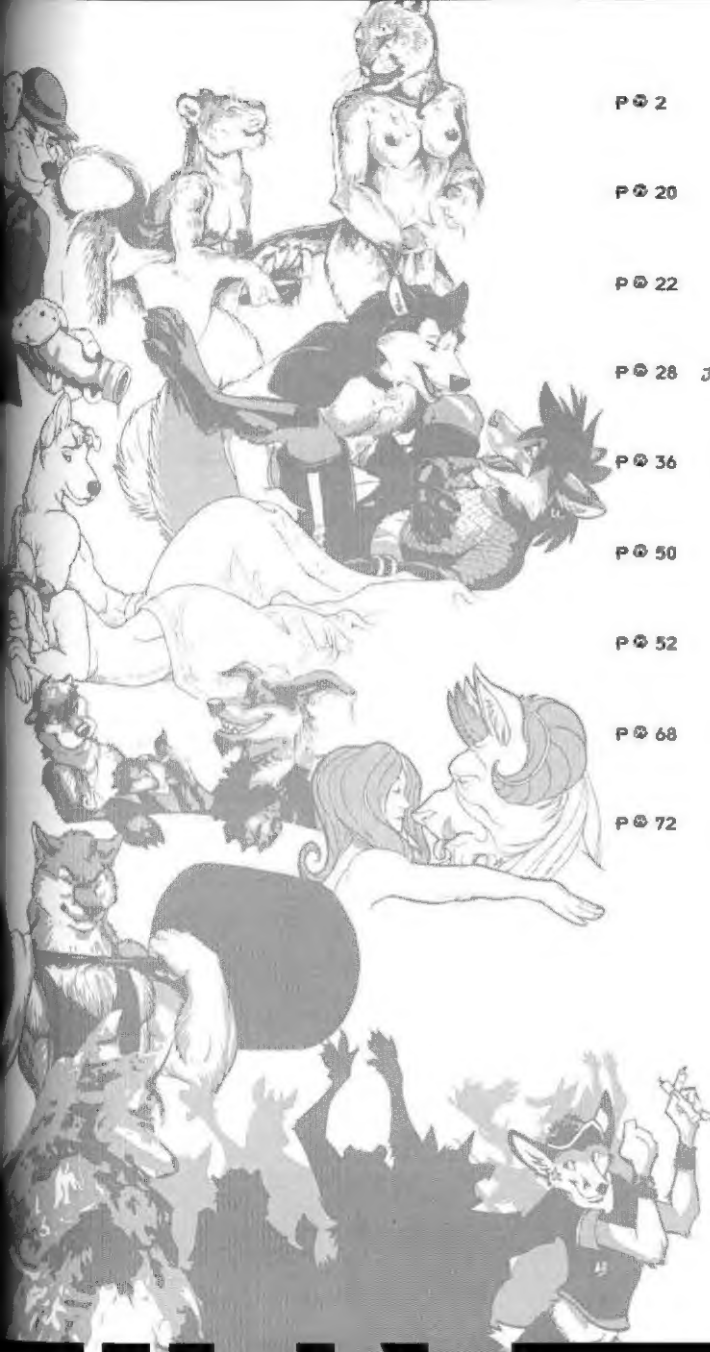


FIVE 2008

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READERS





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Two Rivers

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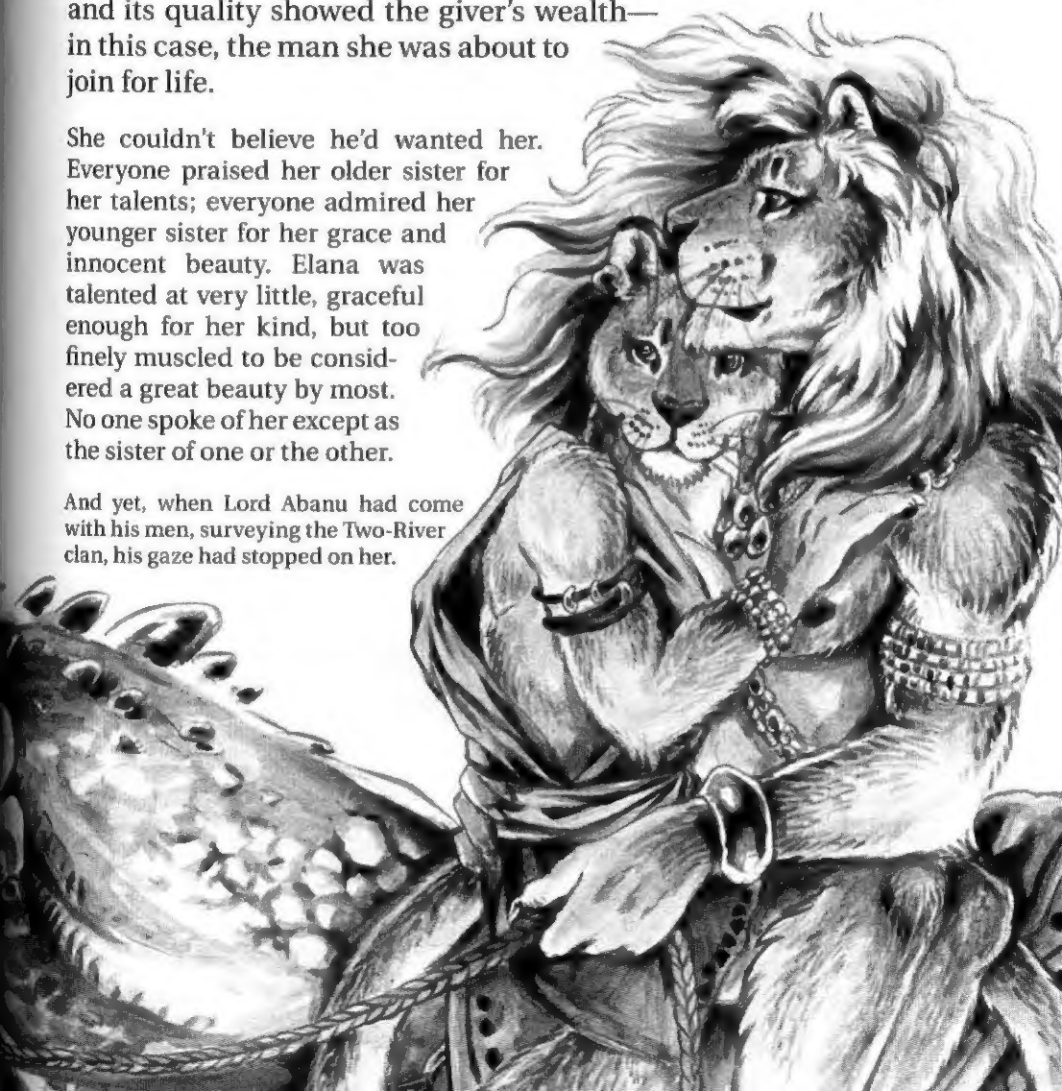


Elana, lioness of the Two-River clan, ran the soft brush over her fur in long strokes, over and over, to be sure all was in place—and to calm herself, though she would not have admitted it to anyone.

It was an elegant brush she was using: the handle was rare *siwa* wood, oiled smooth and dark, carved in a sinuous shape. Brushes were always intimate gifts, but this one's shape hinted at sensuality, and its quality showed the giver's wealth—in this case, the man she was about to join for life.

She couldn't believe he'd wanted her. Everyone praised her older sister for her talents; everyone admired her younger sister for her grace and innocent beauty. Elana was talented at very little, graceful enough for her kind, but too finely muscled to be considered a great beauty by most. No one spoke of her except as the sister of one or the other.

And yet, when Lord Abanu had come with his men, surveying the Two-River clan, his gaze had stopped on her.



She shivered deliciously, remembering. His eyes were the color of sun on the grasslands, luminous and warm. While he had not been impolite to her sisters, he had spoken mostly to her, complimenting her on her eyes, her speech, saying that, truly, her mother must have been a rare beauty with a soul of fire, to birth such a child. And Elana cast her gaze down, embarrassed but secretly pleased, and for her part, spent the time admiring his strength, the quiet power in his voice, and the thick luxury of his honey-colored mane. And so it had been all through the evening, as she and her father and sisters sat on the grass-strewn floor of their home and shared the melon-wine her father had made two years before.

At last the men got up to leave. Her father bowed, and the lord laid a hand on her father's shoulder. "Walk with me, sir," Abanu said then. "I would speak of important things... things I hope will please a father's heart."

It was her younger sister Halima who shook her awake the next morning with the news that Abanu wanted Elana to be his Fourth. Even the cold river water she washed in couldn't convince her that she wasn't still dreaming.

It was nothing to be high about, of course. She knew her father had hoped she might be some man's Third or even Second. Still, to be the Fourth of such a lord was as good as the Second of any common landworker or hunter.

She saw the sun rising over the plain, and as she slipped the brush into her pack, a flutter of nervousness started in her stomach. What would the other wives think of her? She had heard so many stories in the weaving-circles: Firsts who used the others like servants, making them do all sorts of unpleasant chores, or Thirds who were openly resentful of being usurped by a new young favorite.

She wished, for another of countless times, that the rain-fever had not taken her mother. Perhaps she could have given some advice, some comfort; she had always known the right thing to say.

Still, no matter how Abanu's other women were, no matter what else she had to live with, she would have him. That, she decided, would be enough.

She left their hut and scanned the horizon. No sign of them yet, but the sun was just now up...

"Men lie abed later than we do, sister." The laughing voice belonged to Halima, her younger

sister. "I wanted to give you this, before you left." She held out a woven bundle.

It was a sleeping-mat, tightly woven from supple grasses, springy and thick, and it smelled of sweet-grasses and sunlight. Elana marveled at the work. It must have taken weeks to weave, perhaps even a whole season.

"But..." Elana shook her head. "You meant it for yourself—"

"I meant it for the first of us to wed," Halima said. "Feel how thick it is—it will bear up well, even under the weight of two," she added, her eyes flashing mischievously.

Elana looked down, ears back in a blush. It was well known—to all but their father—that Halima had many lovers among the Two-River clan, and she had never been ashamed to speak of them.

"Thank you," Elana said, and then she saw a glimmer of silhouettes on the horizon, and she was surprised at how fast her heart could beat.



The ceremony was short—a pact of business between her father and Abanu. Then came the quick pain as Abanu fastened the gold ring into her right ear, and then the farewells to her father and sisters—and then they were riding out of the Two-River lands.

They rode strange creatures that Abanu called *saurocs*: dull-eyed reptiles with broad backs and a slow, even gait. All were the same gray-green color, with blunt claws, thick tails, and thin pinkish-gray tongues that tasted the air every few moments.

She rode with Abanu, very aware of his chest against her back, his arms against her sides as he held the leather reins that harnessed the sauroc. She was aware, also, of the sauroc's muscles moving beneath her as she straddled it, and as the sleepy heat of the day began, she found the warmth mirrored in her.

Abanu looped the reins around his wrists, freeing his hands, then leaned closer so that his breath tickled her cheek. "Your father said you have never known men," he said, in a whisper even though the guards were all too far away to hear. "Was this truth?"

"My..." Her breath caught as his hands moved slowly up her sides, under the woven cape that covered her above the waist. "My father does not lie." She closed her eyes as his

hands skimmed over her breasts, and she found that she no longer minded the heat.

"Ahhh." He cupped her breasts and ran his fingertips over her nipples until they stood, stiff and almost sore, from her pale fur. The sauroc's weight shifted beneath them, and she felt him pressing stiffly just above her tail, with her skirt and his leather loincloth between them. She thought, at that moment, that she would have him stop right where they were, here among these strange lands, and show her everything she suddenly wanted so desperately to know—even with all his men circled around and watching. This strange heat that pulsed between her legs, that made her press into the sauroc's back, that made the riding-mat wet beneath her—he was the cause of it, he could give her what she wanted, what she'd never known she needed...

He took up the reins again. "Soon," he said. "We'll make camp at dusk... and my men sleep sound when I bring my wives home."

"I..." Was this voice hers? "I do not care if they sleep or wake."

His laugh was a husky rumble. "I can see I chose well."

It felt like days before they made camp. Elana unrolled the sleeping-mat and brushed her fur a bit, lingering over her breasts without realizing it. Abanu led their sauroc away to be tended, and the men settled around them for the evening, kindling fires and warming water to soak their dry traveling-grain.

Abanu returned carrying a melon, and they shared pieces of it, the juice wetting her dry mouth with sweetness and dripping onto her chin and ruff. He licked her chin, then her mouth. Night descended slowly, and soon the only sounds around them were the low, deep breathing of the saurocs, the occasional snore of a sleeping guard, and the high, soothing rush of the wind through the grass.

He took off her cape first, baring her breasts to his touches, his fingertips, his tongue.

"Elana," he murmured, his breath tickling, making her shiver. "My Elana... Fourth in my life, first in my heart..."

She pressed against him, and his hand caressed her thigh, sliding under her skirt. One claw slit the fibers, and she was deliciously nude, each breeze teasing her fur.

She was trembling now, and he held her, his tongue lightly touching her breasts, her throat, her mouth. "Don't be afraid," he breathed.

His hand was cupped between her legs now, brushing over the fine, silky fur, rubbing until his fingers came away wet. She opened her legs, suddenly eager, hungry, surprised at the deep throbbing he'd woken in her.

"Fourths are the most fortunate ones," he whispered, smiling. "I have learned well, how to please..."

She could hear her own breathing loud in her ears, above the pounding pulse of her heart. He dipped his fingers inside her, spreading her warmth over the hard bud of her clitoris, and she heard herself moan, and the sound aroused her even more. She wanted, then, to hear him make the same sound, to be the cause of it, the cause of his pleasure.

She reached for the buckles of his loincloth, and the leather fell away, revealing him at last. His erection was full, nearly straight along the toned muscles of his abdomen. She stroked its length, marveling at the softness of the skin, at how he trembled now under her touch, even as she did under his.

She was on her back now, her head pillowed on the thickest grasses of the mat. He knelt over her and buried his muzzle in her chest, his tongue stroking her nipples again and again.

"It may hurt," he said softly, "but I will do my best to make you forget."

Then his weight was on her, and she wrapped her legs around him. She felt the tip press against her—felt the quick thrust—wincing as she felt herself tear—then exhaled and relaxed, feeling him inside, his length filling her.

Words were lost now. She joined his rhythm, in and out, moving with him. The pace was slow at first, savoring, and she felt as if they had been this way for hours, perhaps even days. Then, gradually, his thrusting became faster, his breathing quick and hard, accented by deep moans. She felt the change in him, knew what was happening without knowing the words to name it.

"Elana," he breathed, "oh, my love..."

His breath caught in a gasp, and she felt a sudden rush of warmth filling her, trickling down from where they joined.

His gasp became a sigh, and he withdrew, slipping out in a rush of thick wetness, cupping his hand between her legs, rubbing his seed over her clitoris, into her fur.

Her heartbeat became a steady roar in her ears as he fondled her. At once she felt as if she were no longer in her body—and yet she had

never felt so aware of it. She understood now why her sister sought this. Nothing, nothing had ever felt so good, so much like sunrise and grass-fire and thunder all at once, pleasure rising in her, building, out of her control—

Climax exploded in her. Her roar was loud enough to wake the camp, but she was far beyond caring. The release was too powerful to voice in any other way.

She fell back, panting, against the grass mat, and Abanu held her, and smiled, and licked her muzzle. Nearby, a sauroc grunted and stamped, and now she could hear the night around them again.

"I'm surprised"—how loud his voice sounded, even at a whisper—"that didn't bring the guards running. You have a powerful voice."

She wanted to lie against him this way forever. "You have a powerful touch, my lord, to bring it forth."

"The first of many nights," she heard him murmur, and then her eyes closed into deep, sated sleep.



She woke just before dawn and was mending her skirt when Abanu rose and dressed. They broke camp quickly, eager to reach home again—they'd been away for many days, Abanu told her.

"A real bed tonight," he said, his eyes sparkling, "and a good meal before, to give us strength!"

Elana smiled weakly. As much as she'd enjoyed the night before, her body still felt tender, and she'd washed blood from her fur that morning. What muscles weren't sore from their lovemaking were aching from the long ride the day before.

The heat baked the plains around them, and she spent most of the day in a half-sleep, interrupted only by the biting black flies that swarmed around them. The sun was going down by the time she got her first look at her new home.

It was a series of grand tents, lashed tight with ropes, held more firmly here and there by wood and the occasional boulder. The cloth of the tents was like none she'd ever seen—too fine to be any fiber she knew, and too brightly colored. The tents glowed red and gold and sienna against the matching sky, and farther in the distance a river snaked lazily across the

plain, its water turned to fire in the setting sun. As they came closer, she marveled at how large each tent was. Even the smallest was twice the size of the hut she'd shared with her father and sisters.

Abanu helped her down from the sauroc's back. "I think you'd do well to rest tonight," he said, "and tomorrow you will see my chamber." He nuzzled her, then called to someone standing nearby. "Jabari."

"Yes, my lord?"

Elana stared, surprised. The name was male, and so he was—she noted his bare chest—but he had no mane, and his voice was strangely high compared to Abanu's.

"Take my Fourth to the women's chambers and see that she's comfortable," Abanu instructed him. "I will send for her tomorrow night."

Jabari bowed. "Yes, my lord. My lady—this way."

She was too tired to ask questions. Jabari led her into a dim tent, to a bed softer than any she'd ever known, and within moments she was asleep.



"Well, she's young enough, that's for sure."

"At least this time he chose one with some meat on her."

"Kind of plain, though."

"As if you were anything to speak of?"

"Hush, both of you! Let her sleep."

"Where'd she come from, Neyla?"

"None of the lordships, I bet!"

Elana opened her eyes to find three lionesses gathered around her. She sat up, then realized she was nude, and that her skirt and cape were not where she'd left them the night before.

One of them—the oldest, with soft golden eyes—chuckled, but not unkindly. "Don't bother yourself; we've already seen everything. Welcome to the house of Abanu. I am Neyla, his lordship's First. This is Suli, his Second, and his Third, Tira."

She looked the three over, trying not to stare—all of them wore cloths at their waists but nothing above. The youngest, Tira, had a dancer's lithe and slender frame, with small, firm breasts, and her eyes were sky-blue and fiercely bright. By contrast, Suli was all curves, with full, heavy breasts and wide hips, though

Elana decided that she did not have quite enough flesh to be called plump. The Second's eyes were deep green and looked as if she were always savoring something.

And Neyla... The best way to describe her eluded Elana for a few seconds, but it was enough to decide that, though she likely didn't order the other two around like slaves, she was without question the one in charge. Her authority was quiet and subtle, but it showed in every line of her body, every toned muscle, every gleam in her golden eyes.

"And your name?" Neyla prompted gently.

"Elana." She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "Of the Two-River clan."

"Told you," Tira said to Suli. "A clan girl."

"And what's wrong with that?" Neyla asked mildly. "He did choose his First from the Crater Plains clan." She turned back to Elana. "Now, we have much to do, but breakfast comes first. Come."

Neyla gave her a short crimson robe to wear—"not that it's necessary among ourselves, and certainly Jabari doesn't care"—and led her into a larger adjacent tent, where a table had been prepared.

Elana's eyes widened at the food. At home, breakfast was grain porridge, perhaps with a slice or two of melon. Here, ostrich eggs waited in gilded cups next to joints of rare meat, and the porridge was smoothly-ground and thick with cream. She couldn't identify some of the scents that reached her from the table, but they smelled delicious nonetheless.

First, though, Neyla handed her a small gourd. "I assume he followed his custom and bedded you last night?"

Elana blushed until her ears were flat, but she nodded.

"Let me guess," said Tira. "Fourth in my life, first in my heart?"

"How did you—"

"We've all heard it," Suli said, smiling.

Neyla nodded at the gourd. "Drink. They tell me it doesn't taste very good, but it's necessary."

Elana drank. It was neither hot nor cool, and the flavor was sharp and bitter. There were only a few swallows' worth in the gourd, but she still struggled to get it down.

"You'll get used to it," Suli said sympathetically.

"What—is it?" Elana coughed.

"A brew of herbs, taken every morning, that keeps your cycles away," Neyla explained.

"Otherwise, we'd be overrun with heirs," Suli added, taking a seat at the table.

"We all share his bed," Tira put in, "but only his First can bear his cubs."

Elana knew that already, though she'd never thought of how it was done. Neyla touched one of the chairs, indicating that Elana should sit there. The chairs were low and backless, and she balanced herself carefully, not wanting to embarrass herself on the first morning.

"It happens sometimes, though," Suli said, "even with the herbs. That's what I heard from the Dry Plains lordship—his Third had twin cubs just after the rains."

Elana watched the others, then picked up the tiny hammer to crack her egg. "What happens to the cubs?"

"They stay with the women until they're of age," Suli said, "and then they make their way among the warriors, or sometimes with a clan if they can learn a trade. Some serve other lords, or even their own. But they have no claim to the lordship as a First's cub would."

"I heard Jabari was the son of a Second," said Tira, licking the inside of a piece of eggshell.

"Not a well-favored Second, unfortunately," Suli added.

"Jabari..." Elana wasn't exactly sure what to ask, or how to ask it. "His mane..."

"He is one of the *hajami*," Neyla said quietly. "They are castrated, to serve the lords' women without temptation, and they are bought and sold in the great marketplace of the Crater, like cloth or grass mats or melons. But he is a good man, whatever he lacks, and if it were my power, I would give him his freedom."

"To do what?" Tira asked. "He's not fit for any other life."

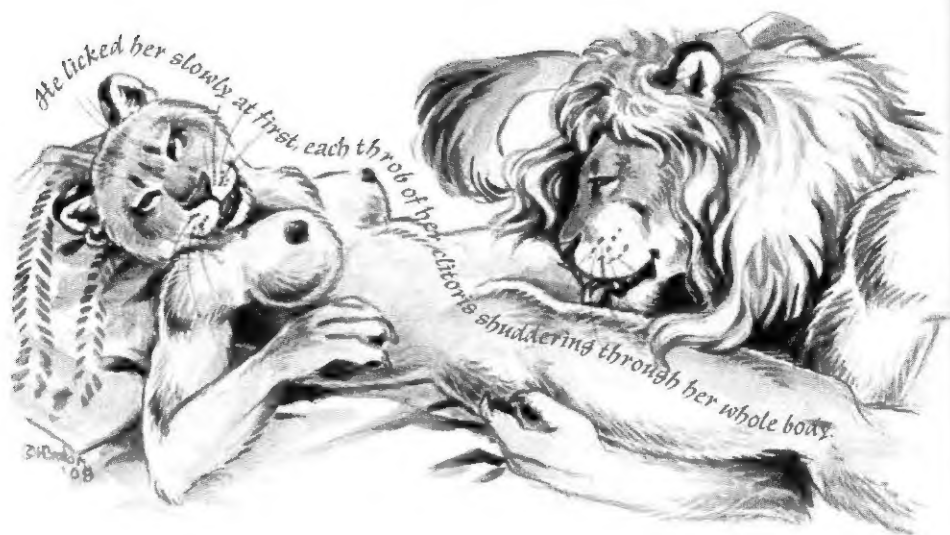
"At least any life he had would be his own," Neyla countered.

"A First shouldn't stir trouble," said Tira.

Neyla's eyes sparkled. "Thirds alone have that privilege?"

Tira smiled back, then returned to her breakfast. Elana sensed then that this was an old argument between them, old enough for the resentment and hostility to fade out of it like grass bleached dry in the sun.

That afternoon, back at the bedchamber, Neyla turned to Elana. "Abanu will send for you this evening," the First said, pacing a slow, appraising circle around her, "and we have much



to do." She glanced at Suli. "Call Jabari and have him prepare the bath."

The bath, Elana found out, was a carved wooden tub, the sides of which depicted couples in poses that made her blush once again—even as she enjoyed looking at them.

"Oh, they're all possible," Tira said with a wink, "if you're flexible enough."

Jabari filled the bath with heated water, and Neyla added several drops of a musky, fragrant oil. While Elana soaked, feeling the water saturating her fur, then reaching her skin, Neyla brought her another gourd. This one was larger and filled with something warm.

"Drink deeply, sister," she said, and Elana drank.

It was spicy and sweet, nothing at all like the earlier brew, and its warmth traveled through her, making her feel both sleepy and sensitive at the same time. "That's better than this morning," she said.

Neyla smiled. "It's called *racha*," she explained. "Brewed from roots and seeds and a few choice herbs, sweetened with wild honey."

"What do these herbs do?"

Suli answered. "Stoke fires."

Suli and Tira washed her, and as strange as it was, she was content to sit back while the others scrubbed her back, her shoulders, her breasts, making slow, lazy circles with gentle brushes. She stood when they were done, and

Jabari poured water over her to rinse. The cascade of it, the warm caress rushing over her, made her shiver with delight.

While her fur dried, Suli trimmed her claws, then painted them with gold. Neyla trimmed the silky fur of her vulva, and in the half-aroused dream the *racha* had induced, Elana spread her legs wider.

Neyla poured a bit of oil into her palm. "Already wet—how eager... This will keep you sweet until sunset." She smoothed the oil over Elana's labia and clitoris in one light, lingering touch, and Elana gasped, then sighed.

They brushed her fur once it was dry, dipping their soft-bristled brushes into scented oils, spreading them into her fur until the very air she breathed was spice and musk and heavy sweetness. How she longed for sunset! Every stroke of every brush was arousing her more—it seemed the *racha* was growing stronger in her instead of wearing off.

Neyla dressed her then, in a silken cloth that rippled like cool water and shone golden as afternoon sunlight. It tied once at her breasts and once just below her waist, and she wore nothing underneath.

"There," Neyla said, nodding approvingly.

Just before sunset, Jabari returned to their tent. "Lord Abanu calls for his Fourth," he said with a bow, "to share his chamber until morning."

Elana followed him out into the warm evening air, to the largest tent that stood slightly apart from the rest. Jabari held the tent's flap aside for her, and its folds rippled closed behind her. Inside, the tent was dim with smoke from sweet grasses smoldering in a hollow stone, and beside that, one oil-lamp burned, giving just enough light that she could see him clearly.

Abanu lounged on the largest and deepest of several cushions. Nothing covered him, and she wondered if he had been given the same racha to drink, for he was already erect, the skin stretched so that it shone in the lamplight.

She sat down by him, and he pulled her gently to him. "How beautiful," he murmured, nuzzling her, burying his nose in her ruff, breathing deeply, sighing, undoing the ties at her breasts, stroking his fingers over their firm curves.

She undid the ties at her waist, then let the cloth fall to the ground and laid down against him, licking his muzzle, his tongue touching hers, his hard throbbing matching the growing ache in her.

He dipped his fingers into a shallow dish of oil on a nearby table, then spread a bit of it at her mouth, and when she tasted it, it was tangy and sweet. He laid back then and drizzled several thick drops along his length, from the thick base to the smooth tip. The oil, she found, tasted just as sweet there, and even when it was gone she kept licking, slowly, base to tip, again and again, to the rhythm of his moans. At last he pushed her gently away and onto her back, parting her legs, pressing his muzzle between them.

He licked her slowly at first, each throb of her clitoris shuddering through her whole body. Then he pressed in deeper, lapping, until the warm, heavy-sweet feeling of climax began to build in her—and he stopped then, as if he sensed it perfectly, and raised up, and was on top of her—on top, and yes, at last, at last inside.

She held him, pressed against him as if they could somehow be closer, more joined than they already were, and her pressing and his weight became a rhythm, both of them in time, both bodies moving together, moving toward the end of hours of longing.

Her whimpering moans became deeper, fuller, and he echoed her. She sensed somehow that he was holding back, and as the first

spasms shuddered through her, his voice was a ragged whisper.

"Oh, my lady... come, please come, I want to hear you..."

She didn't want it to be over, but her body gave her no choice. Climax gripped her hard, forced another roar from her lungs, loud enough to leave her throat raw, and then she heard him add his voice to hers.

They slept a little, woke aroused, made love again, and passed the night this way, until she was not sure whether she was awake or dreaming, until their fur was matted and stiff, until they both fell into exhausted sleep, just as dawn began to lighten the sky.



He was gone when she woke, and Jabari came to escort her back to the wives' tent. She stumbled into bed and slept until midday.

A breeze against her fur woke her. Someone was fanning her slowly—Abanu?

No, Jabari, she saw, sitting up. Her head ached a little, but it was already fading. The others' beds were empty.

Jabari set a clay dish of scented water and a cloth and brush on a low table near her bed. Then he bowed slightly and left before she could gather her thoughts enough to thank him.

Neyla came over as she washed his scent from her fur. "I haven't heard such sounds from his tent since Tira's first night," she teased. "I'm glad to hear my lord can still please a young wife."

Elana felt her ears go back, and Neyla laughed, but gently.

"Come now, sister-wife, we'll have to burn that blush out of you. His bed is a pleasure just like any other—like food, or a fine dress, or music. Would you have us not talk about those? If I were to ask you what you liked best at breakfast yesterday, what would you say?"

"The eggs," Elana said at once. "We never had them at home."

"And"—a sly sparkle in her golden eyes—"if I were to ask what you liked best last night?"

"Everything," Elana breathed, caught up in the memory of it, the heat and musk and sweetness.

Neyla smiled. "I'm glad he took one untouched this time. Oh, he *thought* he did last time," she said, noting Elana's surprise, "but Tira knew quite a bit of those pleasures before

he laid her down by his campfire. But you are very much as I was when he took me to be his First. Everything was new, and I delighted in all of it."

Elana smoothed her fur with the brush, thinking how strange it was to be nude before Neyla and yet feel comfortable. She had done so with her sisters, of course, but she had not expected to feel so at ease here. Then again, her sisters had not gone about at all times as the wives did here. This morning, Neyla wore only a shimmering scarlet cloth tied about her waist, baring breasts much like Elana's own—neither as heavy and round as Suli's nor as small and firm as Tira's. Elana chose a green cloth edged in gold from the trunk by her bed, and tied it the same way.

Neyla nodded her approval. "Come—Jabari's set out a few things for you, to keep you until the evening meal."



The day passed in lazy heat. Suli both entertained and irritated them by turns, picking out tunes on an odd string-and-shell instrument Abanu had brought for her from the coast.

Elana longed for nightfall. Her hunger for him surprised her, even shocked her, but she couldn't deny it was there. At last, after the evening meal was cleared away, Jabari returned to their tent.

"Lord Abanu calls for his Third," he said, "to share his chamber until morning."

His Third? Elana stood for a moment, unsure she'd heard correctly. Tira paused only a moment to brush her fur with sweet-oil, then left.

"Don't worry," Neyla said softly in her ear. "It's always this way, to keep peace, so that the last wife doesn't feel she's being forgotten. I heard him last night. He'll call for you again soon enough."

That night, Elana lay awake, unable to think of anything but the pleasures Tira was certainly enjoying. She remembered the rough, wet heat of his tongue on her clitoris, the softness of his taut skin, the sounds he'd made when she tasted him...

Her hand moved to cup between her legs. Her clitoris was stiff and sensitive from the memory, and it felt good, so good, to touch it, just a little, here, then there, to feel how wet and warm she was. She felt herself throb, pushing

hard against her fingers, and that sensation aroused her even more. She'd never touched herself like this before, never wanted to, but now she needed to; her whole body ached with the need.

She heard a soft moan in the darkness.

She froze, thinking she'd cried out, but a moment later it came again, and then she could hear the heavy, shuddering breaths of two enjoying each other.

But Abanu was with Tira, and he wasn't even allowed to be in the women's chambers...

"Oh... oh, yes..."

It was barely a whisper, but now Elana recognized Neyla's voice. Silently she rolled over and stole a glance at Neyla's bed.

Elana swallowed a gasp. Suli had her muzzle pressed deep between Neyla's thighs, while she pleased herself with her fingers. From the sound of their breathing, Elana figured they had been doing this for some time this night.

Neyla moaned again and spread her legs wider. Elana, heart pounding, felt her clitoris throb in response. She watched Suli's fingers move faster and faster, and matched her own rhythm in time.

Neyla and Suli came almost at the same time, in a rough explosion of breath, obviously trying to keep quiet. A few moments later, Elana buried her muzzle in her pillow to muffle her own hard, deep gasp.

As the glow of climax faded, she heard Suli leave Neyla's bed and return to her own. Elana tried to decide what she was feeling—surprise or curiosity, alarm or interest—but sleep washed over her before she could begin to find any description.



The next morning, they went to the river to bathe, a pleasant change from the usual half-filled basins. Jabari carried an assortment of brushes, towels, and scents; other guards brought long swaths of fabric on thick poles, cloth that was as wide as the men were tall. Elana was puzzled by this, until they reached the spot where the river flowed wide and shallow, and the guards turned their backs to the wives and unfurled the cloths to form a kind of fence around the four lionesses, screening them from view.

Elana followed the others, shedding her robe at the bank and wading in. The water was

a bit chilly, but warmer than the river near her home, and it was wonderful to feel the slow current rippling gently around her.

They washed lazily, spending long moments soaking in the water or scrubbing each other's fur in the strengthening sunlight. The guards stood, seemingly without tiring—the fabric never wavered—their backs always to the wives.

Except, Elana noted, one black-maned young guard who kept stealing glances over his shoulder... and then she followed his gaze and realized he was watching Tira, who was making quite a show of her bath, soaping her breasts slowly, moving her hands down her flat belly, lathering the fur of her vulva, bending down to rinse... then flashing a teasing smile at the guard.

When Neyla came to scrub her back, Elana wasn't sure if she should say anything. But Neyla glanced Tira's way, and judging by the First's expression, she had already noticed what was happening.

Neyla finished with the soap-brush, then dipped a wooden bowl into the river and poured it over Elana's back to rinse. Then she looked back at Tira.

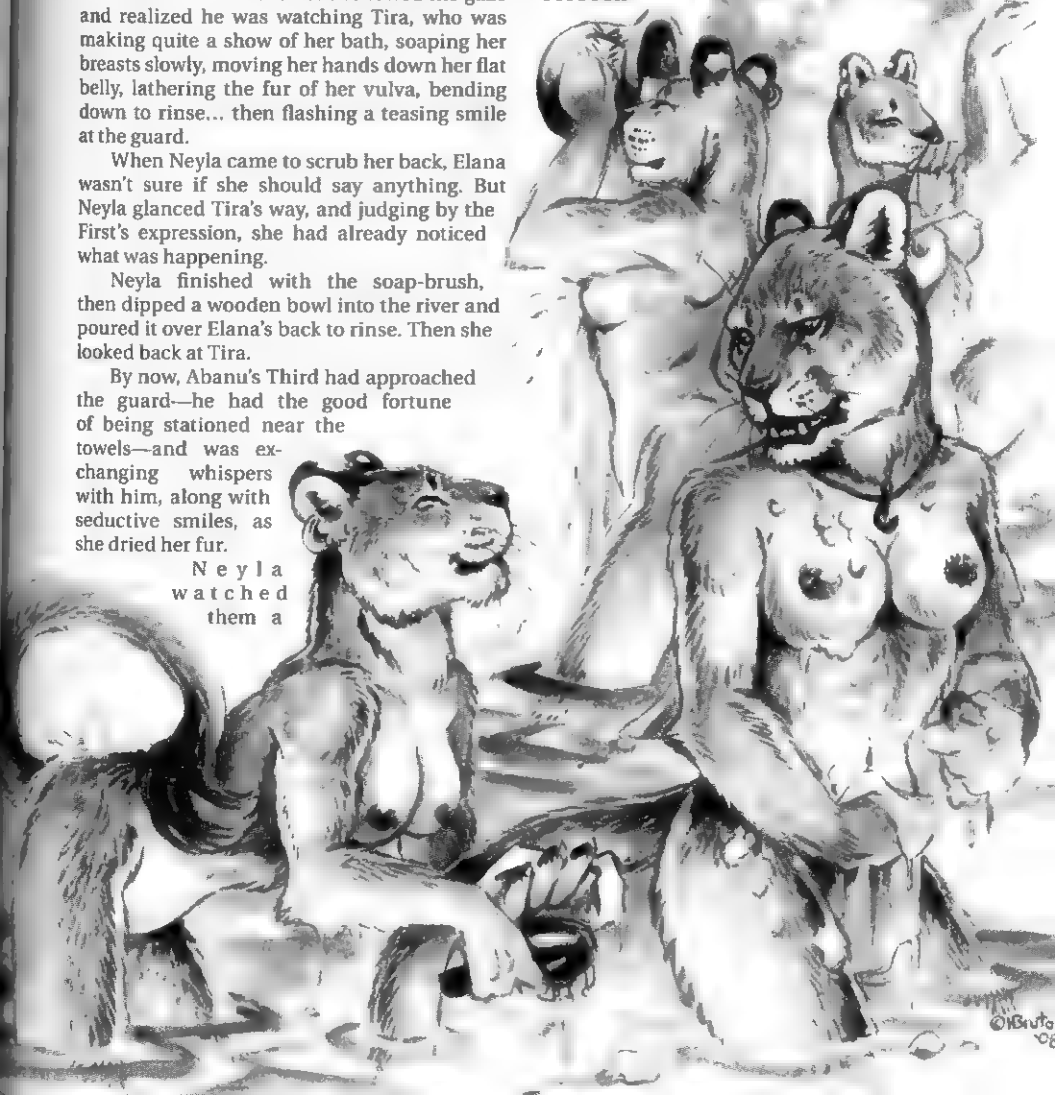
By now, Abanu's Third had approached the guard—he had the good fortune of being stationed near the towels—and was exchanging whispers with him, along with seductive smiles, as she dried her fur.

Neyla
watched
them a

moment, then dipped the bowl again, filling it, and waded slowly toward them.

Elana grinned. She had sisters; she knew what was coming.

Neyla came quietly behind Tira, held the bowl up—tipped it—and Tira's screech



echoed across the river as she and her towel were drenched.

Tira, with a blaze in her eyes that was either anger or fierce mischief, wrenched the bowl from Neyla's hands—and was tackled from behind by Suli, who plunged her face-first back into the river.

"Thought she might need cooling off again," Suli said.

Tira came up coughing as hard as the others were laughing. This time, the fire in her blue eyes was definitely anger, but by the time Suli had soaped her fur again, rinsed it, and brushed it out as they lay on the bank, drying out in the now-hot sun, everything had been forgotten.

Almost everything. Elana hadn't forgotten Tira's flirting with the guard. Surely Tira wouldn't actually dare...?

She got her answer later the same day.

Abanu had already called for Suli, and Elana decided to go for a short walk, to see the sunset and, perhaps, tire herself enough to forget the longings that were nagging her again. Jabari had wanted to accompany her, but she'd made it clear—with a few well-placed blushes—that she hadn't exactly gotten used to the chamber-pots yet and would prefer to... well, to do as she had done at home, at least for a while. Fortunately, he hadn't argued or sent for one of the fabric screens, so she was alone.

She wandered from the tents into open grassland, then rested on a flat rock still warm from the day's heat. Was it normal, she wondered, to feel this—this *need*—so often? Only days ago, she hadn't even known this kind of pleasure, and last night she'd needed it so much that she'd satisfied it herself...

A rustling in the grass nearby caught her attention, and she crouched, not wanting to be seen. Had Jabari been right to want her guarded? She waited, out of sight, heart racing.

"Here. I think we're far enough."

"I know I'm far enough." The first voice was female; the second, male.

"Oh, yes, nice and ready..." Even though the words were quiet, she recognized the voice now, and cold crept into her. It was Tira.

A low, throaty chuckle. "I've been ready ever since this morning... oh, that's good..."

It was not Abanu's voice, she was certain of that. Elana crept silently forward until the grass was thin enough that she could see them. She wasn't sure she really *wanted* to see them—and yet, something drew her irresistibly forward.

The black-maned guard was lying on his back, hands behind his head, loincloth undone so that his erection stood free. Tira, nude on hands and knees before him, was slowly stroking her tongue over and around his scrotum, and now she moved up to bathe the hard length from base to glistening tip. The guard moaned, chest heaving as his body tensed, relaxed, and tensed again, in time with the strokes of her tongue.

Elana, unable to look away, realized she was breathing hard, too, and she fought to control it, afraid they would hear.

"Stop," the guard gasped finally, "stop, it's too—"

Tira flashed him a smile; she'd already stopped. Now she knelt over him, leaning back so he could watch as she parted her labia with one hand and teased her clitoris with the other.

The guard placed his hand underneath, sliding his fingers inside. "Looks like you missed a spot when you dried off this morning," he rasped, "cause you're soaking wet here, m'lady..."

Tira laughed quietly, then straddled him, and Elana watched his thick length disappear into her, then slide halfway out, wet with her, and then back in...

The rhythm intensified quickly, breaths turning to moans and gasps and growls, fierce and quick and low. He rolled on top of her, and she gripped his shoulders, panting as he thrust in and out.

Elana's heart pounded. It was so strange and exciting, this watching, seeing something she knew she shouldn't, something that was supposed to be private, something that was so hard and fast, now, so different from the slow licking and touching at the beginning. She felt her clitoris throb but didn't dare even to cup a hand between her legs, afraid she would betray herself with some sound.

The guard's breathing now was a rhythm she recognized from Abanu, and Tira recognized it too.

"Yes," she breathed, "yes, give it to me, fill me up..."

The guard's body jerked and tensed, and the explosive breath made it clear he was holding back a roar that would have deafened anyone near and sent the saurocs stampeding out of sight. At last, after a final spasm, he withdrew.

Tira looked down. "Well," she said slyly, "I can't go back looking like this."

"Mm?"

"You're going to have to clean me up before I go," she said.

Understanding dawned. "I think I can do that."

"You'll have to be thorough..."

He lowered his head between her legs. "His lordship's guards always do their work well."

His tongue dipped into her again and again, bathing, teasing, testing where her breath hitched in a gasp, where it released in a sigh.

Elana watched. Tira must have had some practice in secret lovemaking—even when arousal rose to climax, when Tira's back arched and she dug handfuls of loose earth, she did not cry out.

Elana waited until they both seemed asleep, then crept away slowly back the way she'd come. Her entire body felt hot. She walked quickly back to their tent—how long had she been gone? Had they been looking for her?

To her relief, only Neyla was in the chamber, but Elana, as usual, was betrayed by her expression.

"You saw something...?"

Elana nodded, still too out of breath to trust herself to speak.

Neyla smiled slightly. "Something that both excited and embarrassed you, judging by that blush." She poured water into a gourd and handed it to Elana. "Tira?" she asked.

"And the guard," Elana said, sipping the water. "From this morning."

Neyla sighed. "I thought so." She took the empty gourd back and filled it with racha for herself, sipping the steaming drink before speaking again.

"Maybe Tira's smarter that way than any of us," she said quietly. "Elana... Do you love Abanu?"

Elana blinked. "Of course."

Neyla nodded and took another sip. "I still remember the first day I saw him. I know he loved me then. It was like he'd never seen any women before me. The way he looked at me, the way he touched me... Once, he came just from touching me, just from my pleasure."

"Now..." She sighed again. "I knew things would change. I was his First, after all, and I loved the thought of bearing cubs for him. I kept waiting for it to happen, but one year passed,

and another, and then he took a Second, and a Third..."

Neyla sat on one of the cushions and set the empty gourd on the table. "And now... When you go to him, he's charming, isn't he? Seductive. Like he used to be with me."

"Now his only love-talk to me is of the son he wants. It's like the saurocs breeding; he mounts me, he finishes, and I walk away..."

Neyla's voice had been getting softer and softer as she spoke, and as she finished it was barely a whisper. Her eyes were dry, but the dull sorrow in her voice made Elana's heart ache.

"All he wants from me now is a son," Neyla said. "And I can't even give him that."

Elana sat down next to her and took the First's hands in her own. She had no idea what to say, but somehow, just holding her hands was something, was almost enough.

Neyla laughed dryly. "So I think Tira is right, in her own way. Seek your pleasures where you can, Elana. Enjoy as much as you can, before it's taken from you. It doesn't last."

She sighed, then gently pulled a hand free and touched her fingertips to Elana's cheek. "You remind me so much of how I was," she said quietly. "How I wish I could be again."

Neyla moved closer, and Elana's heart raced. Neyla lightly kissed the younger lioness' forehead, then drew back. "You're shaking."

Elana looked at the floor, studying the patterns of color on the rug, afraid to speak, afraid not to, afraid to lose this moment, afraid of what could happen. What she wanted frightened her with its intensity, but it was building like the storm clouds of the rains.

"Last night," she began. "I... I heard..."

Neyla smiled slightly. "I'm sorry we woke you."

"No, it's... I..." She had no idea what words to use. She didn't even know if a name existed for the kinds of thoughts that were coming to her now.

"Elana," Neyla broke in, her voice soft and gentle. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." She did; she knew that.

"Close your eyes."

She did. She felt Neyla moving near her, then felt warm breath against her mouth. A moment passed, and then she felt the warmth of Neyla's tongue against her lower lip.

Elana gasped and pulled back, but she kept her eyes closed.

Neyla's voice was a tickling whisper in her ear. "No fear now. No shame. Only the truth. Did you like that?"

"Yes," Elana whispered, and it was the truth. Suddenly she felt it was the only true thing she'd ever known.

"Would you like me to do it again?"

"Yes."

"All right."

The kisses were slow and savoring, light touches of tongues and lips, their whiskers brushing and tingling against each other. Neyla gently laid her down on the cushions, her hands cupping Elana's breasts, stroking over her stiffening nipples.

Elana felt dizzy, felt almost as if her body were no longer her own, but a breathtaking foreign landscape of infinite shade and texture. It began to seem as if she and Neyla were sharing a single body, as if, when she caressed Neyla's breasts, she could feel the same pleasure herself.

Elana felt Neyla's hand slip between her legs, and she allowed herself a soft moan of anticipation. Neyla's fingertips brushed over her labia, dipping inside and smoothing the warmth over her.

Neyla paused a moment, then crossed the room to another table where a small bottle was kept warm over a candle flame. She unstopped it, then drizzled warm oil over Elana's vulva, letting it trickle over her clitoris.

The next touch was smooth and wet and so intense that she fought to keep from trembling. Neyla's fingers stroked, lingering just enough, pausing just enough, continuing just enough.

She was close, she was so close to giving herself up to climax. She wanted it, needed it—but fought it, forced herself to sit up enough to pour some of the warmed oil into her palm, to lay Neyla down beside her, to touch her the same way.

Neyla growled softly in her throat, and Elana felt the vibration of it. Every sense was heightened, every touch a shiver, every breath a murmur of pleasure.

Making love with Abanu was like a storm, building, breaking, then sweeping away as quickly as it had come. This was like the wind across the grasslands; pleasure rose and fell in luxurious waves, stirring and teasing, dying away and building again. It was like the current of the river, and it pulled at them both.

She clung to Neyla, breathed in her scent, and realized she was saying the lioness' name over and over again, quietly, like a prayer, or a blessing. When her first climax came, it was not a burst of ecstasy but a smooth, sweet soaring that left her aching for more.

Neyla's clitoris was a hard bead under her fingers; Elana stroked around it gently, aware that Neyla's breaths were coming in low grunts, that she was close. Elana wanted to make her come, wanted to make her forget everything except this moment, forget all the pain and sorrow, and remember only this, only the sweetness of their bodies against each other. And when at last Neyla surrendered, muffling her deep roar in the cushions, Elana felt herself come again, and it was as if the warm oil had been poured over her entire body.

They lay entwined, breathing in each other's scent, sometimes grooming each other's faces, touching tongues slowly. Elana had never tasted anything sweeter than Neyla's mouth, spiced with the aftertaste of racha, and she trembled without understanding why. Her body felt loose and open and strangely new, almost tender, somehow, although there was no pain.

She had not thought she could feel this way.



That night Elana woke in the darkness and lay there for several long minutes, her heart pounding in the silence. She wasn't sure what had woken her, and suddenly she was afraid of what she might hear.

But the night was quiet around her. She looked to Neyla's bed; the older lioness was asleep, her fur edged with silver moonlight. A breeze stirred, moving the tent gently.

What did she want?

She felt—the comparison was almost laughable, but it was true—as if she were a grass mat, the strands all unbraided, then woven back together in an unfamiliar pattern.

What did she truly want?

Quietly she left her bed and crossed to Neyla's.

Neyla stirred and woke. Her eyes met Elana's. Neither spoke, but Neyla smiled.

Elana climbed into the bed. Neyla's embrace was warm, asking nothing, demanding nothing. They held each other, and Elana drifted into sleep.

The next night, Abanu called for Neyla. Elana watched as Neyla scented her fur, brushing it until it shone like sunlight on the river. Jabari brought her a gourd of something hot and pungent—it wasn't racha; the scent was foreign to Elana—and Neyla sipped at it until sunset.

"Herbs to open her up," Suli explained after Neyla was gone. "To get cubs." The Second sighed. "By Yaa's mane, let it take this time..."

"If you ask me, it's *his* fault," Tira snapped, overhearing this. "How do we know it isn't? If she'd listen to me—"

"Tira," Suli said, sounding tired.

"He'd never know the difference," Tira went on. "That new guard's got enough seed in him to get her a dozen cubs, if she'd only lie with him once."

"That's her choice, not ours."

"Well, she'd better do something," Tira said, crossing her arms. "Before he—"

"Tira," Suli shot the younger lioness a look that made her fall silent.

Elana felt cold. "Before he... what?"

"There's still plenty of time," Suli replied firmly, and she would say nothing more.

It was barely an hour later when Neyla returned.

Elana's heart ached at the sight of her. This was not the same lioness who had loved her the evening before. Her eyes were empty, and yet even in suffering she carried herself with such grace, such broken dignity, that Elana's eyes burned with tears for her sake.

Neyla drew in a breath. "He... calls for Elana."

No one spoke.

Neyla swallowed. "He has done his work with me, it seems, and now he wants pleasure."

Tira's eyes glittered with rage. "He didn't even finish you, did he?"

Neyla's laugh was bitter. "Finish? He barely started. But I suppose once the soil is tilled and planted, there's no need to caress it."

Elana hesitated—then went to her, hugged her, longer than necessary, but not half as long as she wanted. She tilted her head to whisper in Neyla's ear. "I'll come to you tonight. I promise." She found she did not care if the others overheard.



Then she brushed her fur, drank two gourds of lukewarm racha in several long swallows, and went to Abanu's tent.

Surprisingly, he was not reclining on his bed this time; instead, he had a cloth draped over one arm and a basket over the other. He was nude, his penis relaxed into his loose sheath, and there was no sign, either by sight or scent, that he had been with Neyla earlier.

"I was thinking of our first night together, at the camp," he explained. "I was thinking how much sweeter love is under an open sky... Will you walk with me?"

Her body felt odd, tingling and oversensitive. She realized it had probably been a bad idea to drink so much racha at once, but she hadn't wanted him to suspect that... well, that she didn't want him.

And now, as he came to her and licked the hollow at the base of her throat, she heard herself moan and realized her body was betraying her. No matter what she thought of how he'd treated Neyla, she *did* want him. Needed him... His scent was making her weak, and the fur at her inner thighs was thickly wet.

Seek your pleasures where you can...

She followed him out of the tent. Abanu nodded to one of the guards, a young lion with a golden mane, who followed them while obviously trying not to look at either of them.

When the tents were faint smears of color in the distance, Abanu spread the cloth over the bent grasses. The sun was sinking into a crimson flare at the horizon, and the first stars glittered into the coming night. The guard sank a torch into the ground and lit it, then respectfully stepped back into the shadows.

Abanu stretched out on his back, the torchlight rippling over his body. She watched it play over his muscles, saw the shining highlight where the tip of his penis peeked out, saw the shadowed curves of the heavy sac beneath.

She knelt over him, as she had seen Tira do with her guard, and lowered her head to bathe him with her tongue. He groaned, his penis stiffening under the swirling strokes until he was fully erect.

"You... learn quickly," he panted.

She didn't want words. She straddled him, pushed until he was inside, pushed harder against him.

"Mmm... I see." Abanu's hands moved up the backs of her thighs, gripping her buttocks gently, then firmly, teasing under her tail. He

pulled her down against him, working his hips in time with hers.

She bit the base of his throat, breathing hard through her mouth. She had no idea anymore who she was, who she loved, only what she wanted. She held her teeth against his fur, and when she came, bright and searing, she used her last remaining shred of self-control to keep from biting down.

As her climax ebbed, Abanu pushed her and rolled on top of her, still inside. He propped himself on his hands, and she wrapped her legs around him as he thrust, harder and harder with each stroke, crushing the grasses beneath the cloth, releasing a faint green sweetness around them.

He pressed harder against her, and as she heard his breathing shift, she felt her body warming again. By the time he shuddered and filled her, she was close to climax again herself.

"More," she breathed as he withdrew and collapsed next to her.

"More?" he echoed, panting. He laughed weakly. "How much racha did you drink tonight?"

"Two gourds. All at once."

He looked to the sky. "Merciful Yaa... I'm spent and you'll be wet until dawn." He propped himself up on one elbow. "Sekani!"

The guard stepped forward into the pool of torchlight. "My lord?"

"I have a task for you."

"My lord, I would not leave you unguarded—"

"You won't have to leave." Abanu smiled. "I order you to please my Fourth."

The guard blinked. "My lord, I..."

"Don't tell me you haven't been watching. Or listening."

Sekani's ears went back, and he looked uncomfortably at the ground. Then his eyes met Elana's, just for an instant, and she knew that he had been watching, and that he had enjoyed what he saw.

"Look at her," Abanu said.

Sekani did, reluctantly at first, then admiringly, his gaze sweeping over the full length of her body.

"She is beautiful, isn't she?" Abanu prompted.

"Yes, my lord."

"She is... desirable to you?"

"Yes, my lord." His voice was breathier now, his eyes locked on hers. He opened his mouth slightly, and she knew he was tasting his scent.

"Can you please her?"

The guard swallowed. "Most certainly, my lord. I... would be honored."

"Then come and do it." Abanu's tone was neither taunting nor challenging. He spoke as if he had asked the guard to fetch water or deliver a message.

Sekani took one last nervous glance at Abanu, then took off his loincloth. He was already erect, and though he wasn't as large as Abanu, something in his scent teased her.

Abanu stretched lazily, then rolled onto his side to watch, his penis limp and hanging against his thigh. "Make her roar," he said casually, "and I'll double this moon's pay."

Sekani showed no signs of hearing this. He sat down on the cloth, and Elana moved to sit in his lap, nuzzling his chest, drinking in his scent.

He licked her chin, then, as she tilted her head back, her throat. Then he cupped her breasts in his hands and licked her nipples until they were sore.

"How can I please you, my lady?" he breathed into her ear.

She lay back and pulled him down against her, feeling him throb between them. "Anything," she growled in a voice she didn't recognize. "Just make me come."

He slid inside easily. "As you wish, my lady."

Her claws tore into the cloth. She had no idea how—and didn't care—but the angle and rhythm he chose sent rising waves of pleasure through her entire body. She made a kind of whimpering moan she'd never heard herself make before, and distantly she heard Abanu grunt softly in appreciation.

Then Sekani withdrew. "Not yet, my lady," he said gently, and he parted her labia with his hands and lowered his muzzle there.

Slowly he licked around her clitoris, but never touching it, until she thought she would go mad from desire. He slid two fingers inside her, pressing deftly. She arched her back against his touch, and the sound that reached her ears came from deep in her chest.

At last he mounted her again, thrusting slowly at first, then faster, but never losing the spot that was growing hotter and brighter

inside her. She held him, dug claws into him, saw a flare before her eyes—

—and roared, again and again as she came, until she had no breath left, and even then she could hear the sound echoing, around her, within her, her blood pounding thunder in her ears.

He withdrew, and she realized dimly that he had climaxed as well. She felt barely connected to her body, as though the slightest of breezes could blow her away, off across the plain, into the starlit night.

"Well done," she heard Abanu say, and then she was asleep.



She woke in her own bed. She was first aware of a throbbing pain in her head, and then of a cool cloth pressed against it. She opened her eyes, expecting to see Jabari, but it was Neyla.

It was morning, she realized. Or afternoon... Her mouth was dry and tasted of stale spice.

"The headache won't last long," Neyla said, wetting the cloth again and wringing it out. "Just lie still." She chuckled. "It must have been a good time."

"I guess so," Elana mumbled. Her memories of the night before were a series of hazy sensations, as if she'd had a fever and been dreaming. "How'd I get here?"

"Jabari helped you in."

Elana closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the cloth against her temples, then her nose, then her paw pads. "I'm sorry... I didn't keep my promise."

She felt Neyla nuzzle her cheek. "It's all right. I know you meant to. That... means a lot."

Elana opened her eyes and looked into Neyla's, then reached a hand up to touch the lioness' face. "Neyla..."

Neyla stepped back. "Don't say it," she said softly. She paused. "How does your head feel?"

"Better."

"Good." Neyla brushed her muzzle against Elana's damp forehead. "Get some rest."



Another month passed before it happened.

Abanu had been away for several days, leading to an unexpected atmosphere of casual

holiday. Jabari taught Elana to play an elaborate game with light and dark stones, and they held tournaments until Tira, tired of losing, threatened to throw the whole thing into the river.

Elana had spent every night in Neyla's bed. A few nights they made love, needing no drink to kindle desire. Most of the time, though, they simply held each other until they fell asleep. Neyla seemed distracted and troubled during the day, but at night she relaxed, and her sleep was deep and restful. Once Elana woke and lay there for hours watching Neyla sleep, wondering what she was dreaming of. A son, perhaps? Or something else?

Elana was washing clothes at the river when she saw Abanu return with his guards and go into his tent. She scrubbed a robe against the rocks—Tira spilled racha worse than a cub with melon-juice—and wondered idly who he would send for at sunset. Perhaps he would rest tonight... She finished the washing, then spread everything out to dry in the afternoon sun.

Reaching the women's tent, she pushed the flap aside and went in—and stopped.

Neyla was sitting on her bed, her head lowered, and Neyla—the stately, the First, the lady above them all—was weeping silently, her shoulders shaking. Suli and Tira stood nearby looking on. It was obvious that neither of them knew what to say or do.

Elana looked from Suli to Tira. "What's happened?"

Suli glanced at Neyla, but the First did not look up. Finally Tira spoke, her voice much softer than Elana had ever heard it before.

"Abanu," she said. "He's... putting her aside. He's released her."

Elana longed to go to Neyla, to comfort her somehow, even though she still didn't know exactly what was wrong. "I don't understand."

They left Neyla and went outside. "She's no longer his First," Suli explained gently.

Then Elana understood, and anger tightened her throat. "Because she hasn't had cubs."

Suli nodded. "Because she hasn't had cubs."

Elana sighed. "What will she do?"

Tira and Suli exchanged glances. "She can't stay here," Tira said finally.

"Did he bring back a new First?" Elana was surprised at how bitter her own voice sounded.

Tira looked at Suli.

Elana frowned. "What?"

"He hasn't said anything yet," Suli said hurriedly. "But usually they choose another from their house. Usually... someone young."



Elana spent the rest of the afternoon sitting alone by the river, watching the slow movement of water, braiding little twists of grass and watching them float away. She remembered the mat Halima had woven for her, back when she had known nothing, nothing of men or wives or love, nothing of herself...

Was this what Abanu had had in mind when he made her his Fourth? A new lioness, young and unspoiled, to take the place of his First?

The sun was setting. Would he call for her? Would she go to him if he did?

She went back to their tent. The evening meal was silent. Neyla ate nothing, her gaze distant, as if she looked out at a vast and empty horizon.

Jabari came for Elana as they were finishing, all their plates barely touched. "Lord Abanu wishes to speak with you."

Elana cut her meat into smaller and smaller pieces, not looking up from her plate. "Tell my lord Abanu that I'm not feeling well."

Jabari looked uncomfortable. "My lady..."

"I will not be able to speak with him tonight," Elana said.

Jabari cast his gaze down. "As you wish, my lady."

He left their chamber. Elana looked up and saw Neyla looking at her. The older lioness' expression was unreadable.



Night fell cool and soft. Elana lay awake, waiting. Finally she heard someone get up and leave the tent. She waited a moment, then got up as well, took her sleeping-mat and pack from their hiding places, and slipped out into the night.

Neyla had already passed the tents, a woven bag slung over one shoulder. She turned as Elana approached. "Elana, go back inside."

"You weren't even going to say goodbye," Elana meant the words to sound accusing, but tears wavered in her voice.

"I thought it would be better," Neyla turned away and kept walking. Elana followed.



"Where will you go?"

"I don't know."

"Back to your clan?"

Neyla shook her head, then shook her head.

"No, I can't go back there, not now. Not as a released First." She adjusted the strap on the bag and walked faster.

When they reached the river, Neyla turned. "Elana, go back."

"No."

"You're young; you can be what he needs."

"That isn't who I want to be."

"He's still your husband."

"Of my body," Elana replied softly.

"Not my heart. I won't stay in Abanur's house without you. I can't."

"Elana..." Neyla's voice was pleading, and tears shone in her eyes.

"I'm saying it," Elana said, each word fierce and clear. "I'm saying it because it's true. I love you. I love you, and I'm going with you."

They held each other by the river, the stars shining over them, both of them trembling, caught in a current that neither could escape. Neyla's arms were warm and strong, and Elana returned the embrace. *This is home*, she thought, *this is my journey*.

Neyla drew in a breath and spoke through tears. "I didn't think I could love anyone again," she said. "But I can. I do." She kissed Elana's forehead, muzzle, throat. "I do."

The river stretched like a promise into the distance. Elana took the gold ring from her ear, then gently removed Neyla's ring as well. She dropped them both into the slow water, a flash of gold in the deepening night. Then followed her mate out across the grassland.





Wet Dog

by Sheela Ardrian

The day after
we saved the big apartment
from burning down,
she came to the firehouse.

She wanted
to thank us personally,
she said,
as she stroked her white hands
over her black spots.

She wasn't wearing anything
but a green silk robe
over a black bra
and a green thong.

We were all panting
at the sight of her,
and her smell
logged our minds
like sweet smoke –
we forgot all about
our practice session.

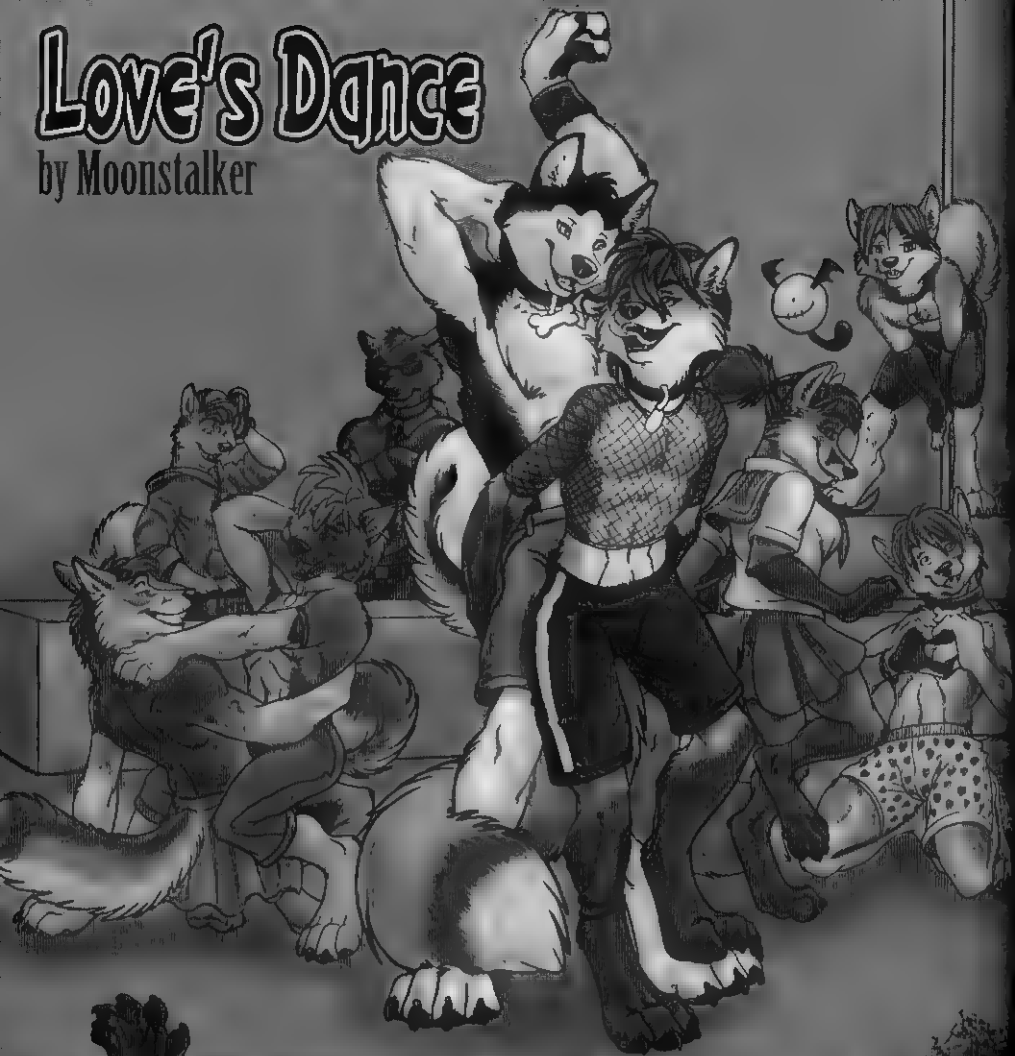
The captain tried to toss her out,
but she just laughed
and stepped in front of the hose.

After that, well –
it's a good thing the alarm
didn't ring that day.



Love's Dance

by Moonstalker



G'NIGHT
SWEETIES!



Klub 9

WELL,
THAT
WAS FUN.

ALEX, I DIDN'T THINK YOU
WERE GOING TO TAKE ME OUT
TO OGLE OTHER BOYS FOR
OUR ANNIVERSARY. *GIGGLE*

SUCH OCCASIONS
ARE BEST SPENT
WITH FRIENDS
BESIDES, I KNOW
WHOSE FOXIE YOU
ARE, SABASTIAN



HOME
SWEET
HOME.



MURR. THAT MEANS
YOU'RE ALL MINE,
HUSKER.



CHUCKLE
IT'S HARD TO
THINK IT'S
BEEN A YEAR.

THE ONLY THING
I'M THINKING
ABOUT IS THIS...



OH... AND
THIS TOO.



MMMPH!
EVIL FOXIE.



CHUCKLE YOU
CERTAINLY KNOW
HOW TO GO AFTER
WHAT YOU WANT.



MMM, AND
LOOKS LIKE IT'S
RIGHT WHERE I
LEFT IT.



RRRF...



THERE YOU
GO... GOOD BOY.



WURF, YOU
REALLY ARE
TERRIBLE..



EEP! NOT AS
TERRIBLE AS
YOU WITH THE
COLLAR AND
FANG PLAY.
GIGGLE





WHAT A NICE
BLACK BONE
YOU HAVE,
PUPPY...



CHUCKLE
LEMME SHOW
YOU HOW GOOD
I AM AT
BURYING IT.



RRRR, JUST
LIKE YOU LIKE
IT, MMM FOXIEP

NNNG!
MMM, YES GIVE
IT TO ME JUST
LIKE THAT, BIG
BOY.



JUST
ANOTHER
SATURDAY



story by Rechan

illustrated by Autumn Sunrise

Some people ask me how I could live with, much less love, Desiree. It's not a question I can just answer; to understand, you have to know us, know our life.

Take last Saturday for example.

I woke up around two in the afternoon, Desiree sound asleep beside me. The curtains in our bedroom were dense enough to leave the room in twilight, so her curly red hair looked more like a pool of blood on the pillow. That thought made me want to spoon her and touch her forever, but I didn't want to wake her up. Like me, she had a long day ahead of her. All I did was nose one of her big pink ears and pet her side before slipping out of bed.

First the bathroom, next a jog around the neighborhood, finished with a cleansing shower. I pulled on my uniform and had a breakfast of a smoothie and some water on the way to work.

My partner was waiting for me, sipping a cup of coffee. A few inches shorter, several years older, and a dozen pounds heavier, the raccoon wore it all with a bitter pride. He was good at what he did, but you had to be.

"Calib," he greeted, wiggling his fingers at me.

I grinned, wagged, and returned the favor as I climbed up into

the passenger seat. "Marcus. You ready to roll?"

"Yup."

I grabbed the radio and told Connie we were ready to go. It didn't take long for a call to come in.

We were the first to the scene. The mother was in hysterics (they always are), but the kid was oddly calm. Gunshot to the shoulder, point blank. Just another reason why I'll never own a firearm. Fortunately he'd be okay—we stopped the bleeding on the way to the hospital, and he said it didn't hurt, just like when SpiderTiger gets shot. I guess even little badgers are made of tough stuff.

The second vic an hour later wasn't so lucky. They called us just after the cops released the scene. Woman slipped in her tub. We carted her as far as the medical examiner's office.

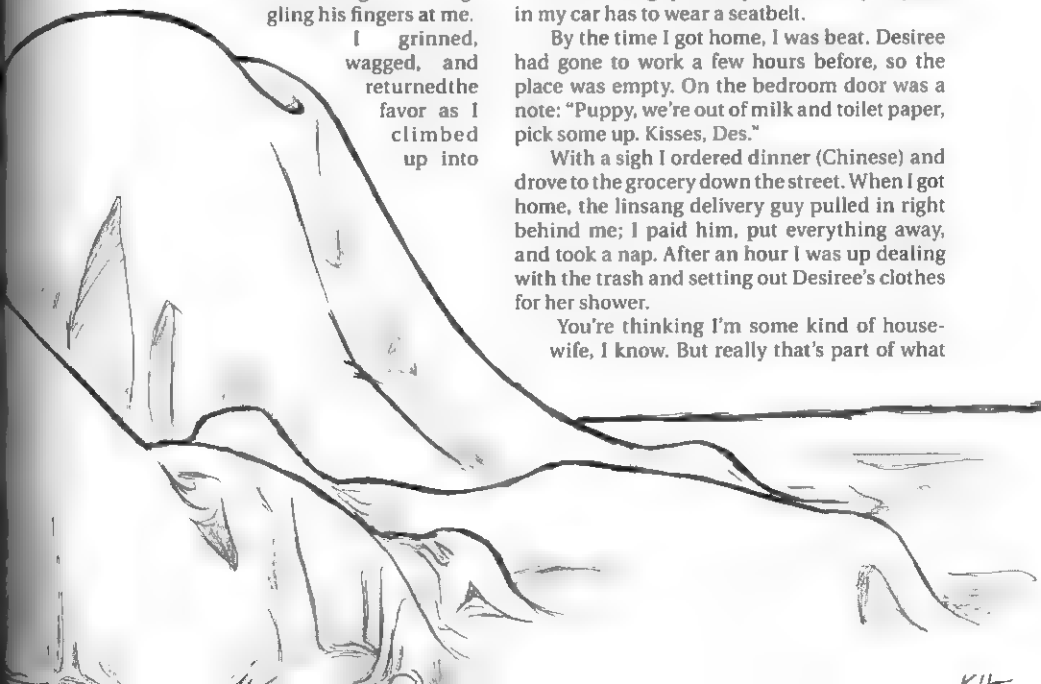
Right after our dinner break a house fire call came in. We let the horse who was caught inside go after we made sure he just had singed fur and some smoke inhalation.

Then came the car crash. We rushed both victims to the hospital, but while we managed to keep one breathing but unconscious, the other was DOA. Nothing we could've done. Internal bleeding, probably. This is why anyone in my car has to wear a seatbelt.

By the time I got home, I was beat. Desiree had gone to work a few hours before, so the place was empty. On the bedroom door was a note: "Puppy, we're out of milk and toilet paper, pick some up. Kisses, Des."

With a sigh I ordered dinner (Chinese) and drove to the grocery down the street. When I got home, the linsang delivery guy pulled in right behind me; I paid him, put everything away, and took a nap. After an hour I was up dealing with the trash and setting out Desiree's clothes for her shower.

You're thinking I'm some kind of housewife, I know. But really that's part of what



makes me happy. See, some paramedics after a while take to drinking, or building little models, or something to deal with the stress of all that blood and life that slips through their fingers if they're not fast enough, or the patient's not lucky enough. For me it's Desiree. I like having someone who I can take care of. Before I showed up she couldn't manage money, or well—Des is just very disorganized and let's just say she's better off now. That makes me feel proud.

She was later than usual, but I'd been given fair warning. Still, I was a little anxious by the time her key hit the lock, so I met her full on with a hug when the door opened. Though anything I was going to say got snuffed out when the muggy scent of sex all over her punched me in the nose, forcing my ears and tail down. It was then I got a good look at her high heeled boots and tube top.

Pulling back, she gave me a small smile. "Sorry puppy." The real apology was in her blue eyes. It was my own fault; I knew she had a long night tonight. Giving her ear a nose, I shoosed her towards the bathroom.

I should probably explain: Desiree's a prostitute.

For about fifteen years now, prostitution's been legal in this state. It's regulated: weekly checkups for the girls, mandatory rubbers, usually run out of a brothel. Some of the brothels even allow clients to meet the girl off-site, but this requires extensive background checks, a fancy GPS collar for her, and check-in phone calls back to the office.

The way I see it, selling your body for sex is like selling your body to provide security or build houses. Yes, sex is intimate. But once upon a time, the only people who you protected or who you built a house for were those who you had intimate relationships with.

Despite that, we have rules. One is that I don't want to smell her clients, so she usually does a quick workout at the brothel gym and a once-over shower to get rid of the mess. Another is that outside of work, no other lovers. Sure, we've very rarely invited someone home we both thought was attractive, but it's just me and her. Also no kissing clients.

By the time she was out of the shower, I had dinner warmed up and on plates. She came to the table in just a long t-shirt (one of mine), some undies, and a towel wrapped around her hair. The snowy color of the terry cloth matched her pretty white fur, much like the pink panties

went along with her naked tail. For some reason, the towel-around-the-hair always looks so cute to me, and half the time I think she does it just to see me wag my tail at her.

Stepping over to me, she put her arms around my shoulders and, squeezing, gave me a kiss. It was nice and soft. All the heat from the shower left her real warm, so it was like hugging a pile of fresh laundry. Pulling back just enough, Desiree lifted her lips up to suck on my nose. With a bark I tried to pull my muzzle out of range, and we had a little game of gotcha.

We separated, she giving my chin a nip before settling down at her plate.

A minute or so of silent eating went by. "You okay?" She asked.

Already forking a piece of sesame chicken, I peeked up. "Rr?"

"You look a little worn out," she explained around a chopstick full of broccoli.

Just nodding, I sipped at some water and smiled weakly. "I know your client held you over, but you look beat up too."

She shrugged while stuffing rice into her mouth. Even if she was nice and petite, Desiree could eat. Some times she doesn't have a lot of opportunities at work. "Yeah. It was a party."

That's right. That'd explain why she didn't have time to clean up at work. "Were you the busiest?"

"No," she said with a full mouth, taking a long pull on her glass of milk. "I was playing second fiddle to Monique, but I'm still sore all over."

The House that Desiree works for offers Party Packages, which has some options for how many girls you want over, charging by the hour rather than by the act. Included is the services of security guards who come to make sure everybody plays nice with the girls. I trust Bianca, Desiree's boss; she knows her stuff, and prostitutes are a lot like cops: it's a duty to look out for your coworkers.

The conversation shifted to other stuff. That was about as in-depth as we went when it came to work. Mine's depressing and we both still feel kind of weird talking about hers. At first I was curious. That was until she told me about the guy who had her act like his teenage daughter's best friend and took her out for a day long date so he could pretend she would fall for him and have sex with him.

When she took up the dishes and started washing, I snuck up behind her and, turning



her head to me, licked her muzzle clean of the brown sauce and rice sticking to her wet fur. Mm. She giggled and pushed me away, even if her rope of a tail hugged my ankle. "Eef, dog slobber!"

"Don't you like my slobber?" I gave big sad eyes.

Turning back to the sink, her smile was only catchable in her voice. "I do—but I get enough of it from your kisses!" Glancing over her shoulder, she asked, "Did you set the TiVo?"

"Always do."

I went and got down into my boxers and sprawled out on the couch, waiting for her. As soon as she came in, I turned on the TV and started fiddling with the controls. Then she stole the remote, and with a laugh I pounced her. We rolled around on the floor until her towel fell off, and she wrapped it around my head.

"Hey!" I retaliated by tickling her.

That made her let go. "Squeak!"

After some more tickling for good measure, I flopped onto the couch. She slipped into the bathroom before coming back to plop on my lap with a cute pout and a brandished hair brush. As soon as I got the show to play, I started to comb her hair. Since it was something I loved doing, there wasn't much of a complaint from me. After I was finished brushing, my fingers took over, just caressing through the long, lush curls, dragging my nails through the fur of her scruff in the process.

This was actually our Thursday ritual, but since my shift was shuffled around that day, we made due tonight. Really we could've watched it Sunday, since Sunday and Monday were our weekend, but both of us were eager to watch "Saviors". You know, "Protect the schoolgirl, protect the world"? We were pretty addicted.

Throughout the show, I held her against my body, nosing the line of her neck. She melted, especially over the stroking along her belly and sides. I just needed to hold her like a wiggly teddy bear.

Wiggle she did too – her butt rubbed over my lap absently. Eventually she had something firm to sit on. The only acknowledgement I got was a rueful smile over her shoulder.

Another odd thing about us is that I've not got a huge sex drive. I get really needy now and then, but on a day to day basis, it's just not much of an issue. In a way, Desiree being a working girl helps out our relationship—she's a little on the more needy side than me, and work gets that out of her system for the most part.

But often clients don't accommodate her needs, and that's where I come in.

After the teaser for the next week's show was over, she leaned back, laying her head on my shoulder to peer up at me sidelong. "I want to go to bed." The comment was innocent enough, especially with a tired sound followed by her nosing at my cheek.

TV and lights went off, door got locked, and all those other odds and ends had to be taken care of before we crawled under the sheets.

Desiree flopped on her back while I spooned her side. I stroked her tummy, eliciting a little squirmy giggle. "No tickling, I'm tired."

"You're worn out, not sleepy," I said, "You could lie around and veg for a while."

With a shrug she just pushed her head up under my chin. To which I stuffed my nose in her ear and snuffled, drawing out a giggle, before I started to lick along the interior of the pink cup.

That garnered a shiver out of her. She pushed at my head away faintly and sighed. "Not tonight, I'm sore."

"Where?"

Brushing a bang out of her eyes, Desiree ummed. "My neck, my thighs, my insides..."

I gave her side a nudge. "Roll over."

"No puppy," she whined, a hint of exasperation filtering into her lips. "Not in the mood to make love."

I propped up on an elbow and peered down at her with a smile. "You, not in the mood?" With a quirked brow, I reached up to ruffle her hair. "Just roll over, okay?" That little plea was chased with pleading dog eyes and a "trust me" look.

Desiree rolled her eyes and made a big production of getting onto her stomach.

I slid to straddle over her back. I started with her hair. First I just ran my fingers through the curls, but then I pressed my fingerpads down and rubbed firm enough to make her scalp move, and I dragged them all over. She sighed and stretched under me.

Then I moved to her neck. Cupping the sides, I gave a gentle squeeze, grinding the heels of my hands down into the tense muscles underneath the fur.

"Ooh," she breathed. "That feels much better."

Without a word I kept at her neck, letting my fingers ripple together, before paws wandered lower. That spot where shoulder and neck met was the next target, though it received a more pointed treatment: digging my nails in and squeezing hard, I tugged out before pushing right in again as my thumbs sunk into the back of her neck. It was like trying to squeeze a bag of sand. Either she had given enthusiastic head, or a lot of it. "You weren't kidding about being sore." She grunted in acknowledgement while I kept it up.

From there, my paws drifted to the middle of her shoulders. The collarbone got my fingertips, while I grinded the heels of my pawpads into the back of her shoulder. Squeezing, I tugged the muscle up, then out, before letting it go back. That became the rhythm, and as I kneaded, my thumbs pushed between her shoulder blades.

Beneath my hands, Desiree tried to pull away, and then pushed up some. For my troubles I received contented mouse noises.

It took me about five minutes to work myself down her back, prodding here and clawing there. I put my upper body into it, rolling the heels of my palms across her lower back like I was using a rolling pin.

"Ow!"

My bent ears perked and I sat up. "What?" "Gymnastics injury."

With a lolled tongue, I reached back and tugged her tail. "You were in gymnastics?"

Letting loose an exasperated humpf, she peered over her shoulder. "I told you that like, a hundred times. Junior high and half way through high school? Made it to state my freshman year? Broke my hymen tumbling? I know I've told you that."

"Oh. Yeah, that sounds familiar."

She glared.

Tickling didn't save me, so I just nosed at her neck and sought forgiveness with light licks. "Okay, okay." Her tail wound around my ankle, giving it a weak squeeze.

"So," I asked, just running my fingers up and down her back through the t-shirt, "How did you hurt yourself?"

"You know the pommel horse?"

I nodded.

"Got going really quick on that, hand slipped, handle poked right in there."

The wince I gave garnered a "Yeah."

Then my nose crunched up. "Wait a minute. I thought pommel horses were for guys."

She flicked her tail, curling it around my waist. "I was trying to build up my upper body strength, because I sucked at hand stands. Also, really good cardio."

Avoiding her injury, I continued down her back. Eventually I had to scoot downwards, straddling her thighs. That long, pink tail was my next stop. Had there been fur it would have been harder to massage, but with it just skin and muscle, I could grab hold and squeeze, or pinch it between two fingers and grate them back and forth. Avoiding the sensitive base, I went higher, up until I started nosing at the very tip.

Once more she was wiggling and sighing. Then I went lower, worrying her hips, the very topmost part of her upper thighs.

That's when I cupped her butt. I love Desiree's butt. Like the rest of her, it was small and tight and worked like a machine.

At first it was like any other area, me squeezing it and rolling the muscle through my fingers. But then I started showing her how much I liked that tush, paying close attention to those spots that she liked touched, the ones that drew more than the regular reflexive twitch. Soon she was flexing and spreading her thighs a tad, and how could I forget the trickle of arousal sneaking through her panties.

"Calib," she warned, though my tail wagged when I caught breathiness to her tone.

My paws moved lower. Starting in on the backs of her thighs, I worked one, then the other, taking my time to stroke along the fur as much as I massaged. Eventually though, I began to creep along the interior of her legs, pushing them apart so that I could press along the inside and roll the muscle in tight circles.

She writhed. Not only was it a source of tension, but a place of pleasure, exploited when my thumbs glided along the upper spots. The smell of her crawled up my nose, forcing me to pant just a little.

Finally I settled my palm along the crotch of her panties, pressing down to pet with firmness behind it.

"Calib," she warned again, but this time the scolding was at the edge of her voice, forced out by a low tone of enjoyment.

Smiling up at her, I bumped my nose against her tail. "You said you were sore there. I should finish up the massage, don't you think?" All ready I was peeling her panties off.

With an exasperated sigh that was mostly for show, she gave in; hiking her hips up was all the permission I needed to keep going. I took my time sliding her undies off until I freed them from her ankles, then they were over by the dresser real fast. My paws crept back up her legs.

Grabbing the lowest part of her butt, I started stroking with just my thumbs, smoothing them through the bare skin of her crotch. Desiree keeps shaved down there, but above there's a little straight line of red fur that looks like an exclamation point. Already she was getting a little moist,

especially by the time my fingertips started sliding along her pout, up one side then down the other.

Heat came off her like a sheet-covered vent, and I warmed my hand on it. The soft leather of my pawpad just barely grazed her as I stroked the whole of her, then pushed forward solidly and began to work her, putting the pressure straight down from my shoulder through to the heel of my paw.

In moments she was pushing back against me, breath whistling through her nose.

Balling my paw into a fist, I started dragging and rolling my knuckles against her, poking at one lip in particular, then the other. I even went so far as to catch the skin between two knuckles to tug. Keeping on, I twisted a knuckle into her little button, dragging a sudden squeaky grunt out of her.

One finger went in, tracing her interior a moment before a second one joined it. From there I rubbed in tight little circles, working deeper into one side, and alternated in another direction. Outside of her, my thumb kept up the screwing press, especially onto her button when my wrist turned. Lewd little noises escaped, making me loll my tongue. The scent had my tail beating against the bed; she was hot. I just wanted to roll around in that smell.

Sliding up the bed, I nestled in behind Desiree after coaxing her onto her side. She arched her leg up, letting me worry away at her insides. I started licking along the back of her ears and neck, occasionally biting her scruff. While she was not a dog or cat, that was still a nice spot, one that drew hot gasps, especially when I started jerking my head side to side like I was playing tug of war with it.

The growl was just for show, but she still squeezed my hand with her thighs and moaned.



I wanted to get her off. For me it was like the massage: just for her satisfaction. Without me, it'd be uncommon for someone to look out for her enjoyment. Many guys could have her body, but I was the one she came home to care about, the one who mattered.

"Calib." This was a different kind of warning, but I didn't need it; I knew the signs. Her thighs squeezed together, the thin length of her tail curled in on itself before slapping the backs of her thigh. Panting, her back arched and she went to just grunting out squeaks and other noises that remind me of a chew toy.

With a long, low moan she came. She was so pretty when she did too – her face crinkled up all cutely, while she tried to bury her nose in her chestfur and her ears turned a cute shade of pink. Throughout the squirming I just kept petting her, kissing her neck.

We laid there together, breathing in the collective scents, though after a minute I buried my nose in her hair to nuzzle. I crushed her against my front like I was trying to smoosh us into one person, the warm hold receiving no complaint.

Nothing was said about the erection pressing up along the back of her thigh. If I didn't

worry about it, she wouldn't feel guilty about not dealing with it. I understood she'd seen enough penis for one day.

When she could move, Desiree rolled over. She shakily planted a hand on my chest and, hoisting up, kissed me. With the sex poured down the drain for the most part, it left our mouths to just gently play, tongues dancing and lips brushing. I don't know how long we laid there and just licked one another's snouts, me doing a lot of nosing in the process, but eventually I'd matted most of her maw down with spit. She pointed this out with a fake scorn and just rubbed her face into my chest to get it all off.

We settled into just stroking one another, fingers gliding through fur, absent touches over ears, then stilled to just nestling against one another. It didn't take long for us to relax, and from there we sank into drowsiness.

"Love you," Desiree murmured.

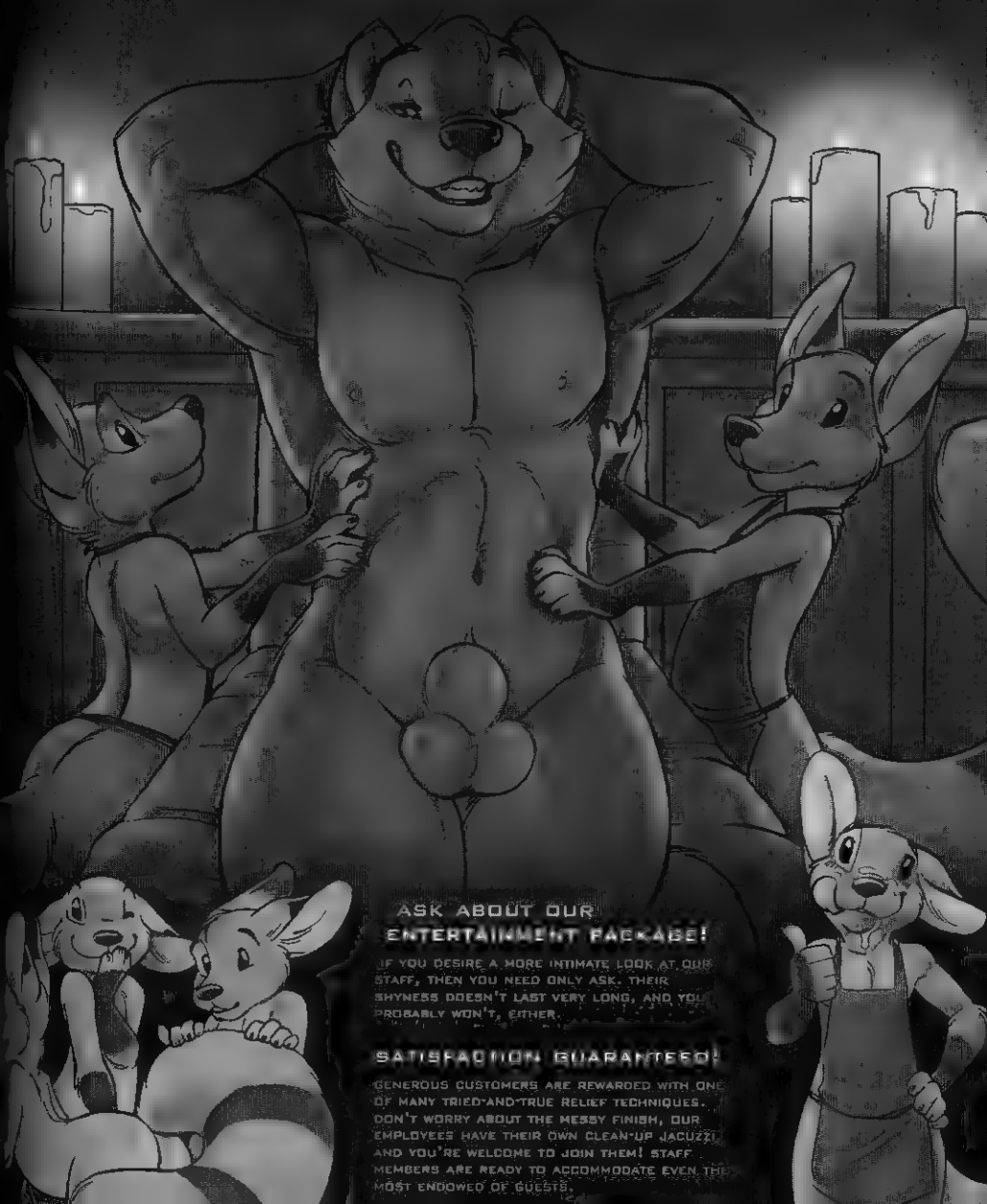
It made me feel at ease. I nosed one of her ears. "I know. I love you too."

Sleep came pretty easy after that.

I love Desiree because she's a person, and lets me be me, and we're together. She isn't her job. Nor am I mine. But we're us. That's all that matters.

salon de citron

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COMPANION SERVICE • EXOTIC ENTERTAINMENT



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SHYNESS DOESN'T LAST VERY LONG, AND YOU
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OF MANY TRIED-AND-TRUE RELIEF TECHNIQUES.
DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE MESSY FINISH, OUR
EMPLOYEES HAVE THEIR OWN CLEAN-UP JACUZZI,
AND YOU'RE WELCOME TO JOIN THEM! STAFF
MEMBERS ARE READY TO ACCOMMODATE EVEN THE
MOST ENDOWED OF GUESTS.









I REALLY LOVE
NEW ZEALAND. IT WAS
THE FIRST PLACE I TRAVELED
TO COMPLETELY ON MY OWN...
I REALLY CONNECTED WITH
EVERYTHING THERE.
I SORT OF CAME ALIVE
THERE, YOU KNOW?



SORRY FOR
BLABBERING ON AND
ON-- I'M JUST SO
HAPPY TO SHARE
IT WITH YOU.



WE'VE BEGUN OUR
DESCENT INTO AUCKLAND.
PLEASE FASTEN YOUR
SEAT BELTS.




I CAN'T WAIT!
THERE'S SO MUCH TO
SEE AND WE ONLY HAVE
THE WEEKEND!



I MEAN--



--TO SHOW
IT TO YOU.



I AM REALLY
LOOKING FORWARD
TO IT. THAT AND ALSO
GETTING TO KNOW
YOU BETTER.



IT'S MY
FIRST TIME HERE.
I'M LUCKY TO HAVE
SUCH A CUTE
GUIDE!



I DO
MY BEST!





G'DAY! NICE
TO SEE YOU BACK
SO SOON, MATE.



I JUST CAN'T
STAY AWAY FROM
THIS PLACE. CAN I
RENT A DOUBLE SEA
KAYAK FOR THE NIGHT?




A DOUBLE
THIS TIME?

GOOD ON
YA, MATE!



I'VE JUST
THE ONE FOR
YOU!

I'LL GET IT
DOWN TO THE SHORE
FOR YOU AND WE CAN
SETTLE UP THERE.



AH, FOUND YOU.
SORRY I WANDERED OFF
THERE A MOMENT-- I HAD
TO TAKE CARE OF
A LITTLE BIZZQ.


THERE
YOU ARE,
DIEGO!

I FIGURED YOU
COULDN'T HAVE GONE
TOO FAR. I GOT US
A KAYAK BUILT
FOR TWO!



I UHM...
CAN'T SAY I'VE
TRIED THAT
BEFORE.

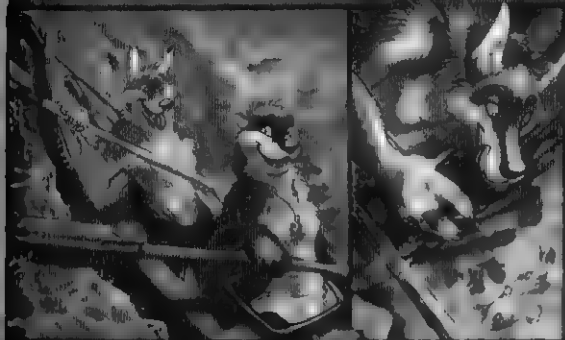
DON'T
WORRY! I'LL
SHOW YOU!



FIRST TIME
FOR EVERYTHING
I SUPPOSE.

IT WILL
BE FUN!

YOU DON'T
MIND GETTING A
LITTLE WET,
DO YOU?





FANCY
A LICK?



WINE! SO
THAT'S WHERE
YOU WENT!

WHAT'S A
TRIP TO THE KIW
NEST WITHOUT A BIT
OF WINE BY THE
WATER?



BUGGER.
I FORGOT TO
GET ANY CUPS.



WELL, I'M
GLAD WE'VE
ESTABLISHED
THAT!



MMMM...
I'M ALSO GLAD
I GOT THE MERLOT.



THANKS FOR
BRINGING ME
HERE.

BENDIGO'S
GREAT AS BEACHES GO—
BUT IT CAN GET A BIT
CROWDED. IT GETS HARD
TO KNOW SOMEONE
ONE-ON-ONE.

I'VE BEEN
WAITING TO HAVE
YOU ALL TO
MYSELF.



I WANTED TO TAKE
YOU HERE, MOSTLY BECAUSE
IT'S SPECIAL TO ME, BUT I ALSO
FEEL SAFE HERE... AND EVERY DAY
ALWAYS SEEMS SO FULL OF
POTENTIAL, LIKE I'M REALLY
AT THE START OF SOME-
THING WONDERFUL.



EVER SINCE
I MET YOU...
I FELT, SORT OF
THE SAME WAY,
I GUESS.

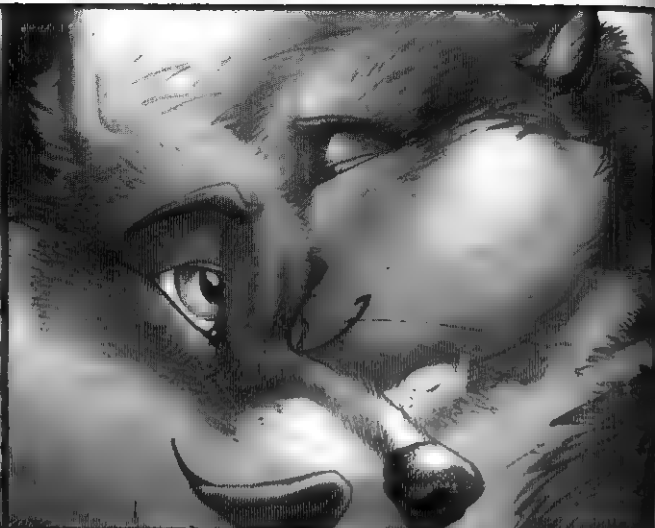
I'M GLAD
TO BE A
PART OF IT.

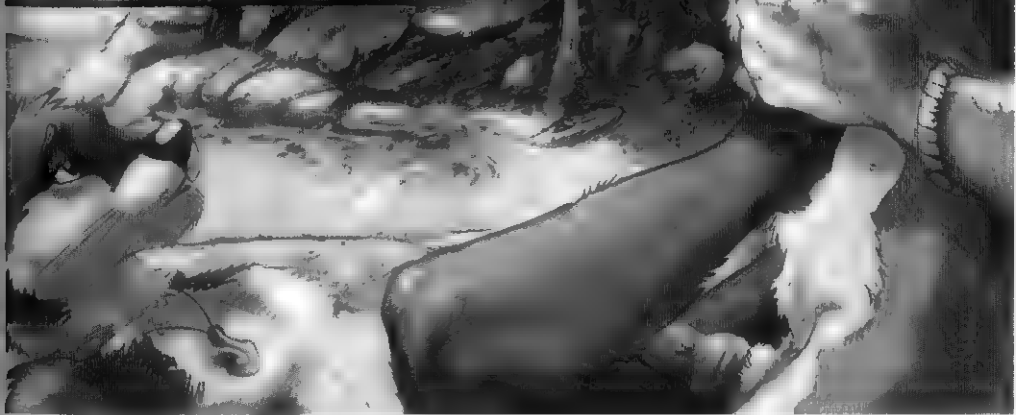


DIEGO...

I KNOW WE HAVEN'T
KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR VERY
LONG, OR IF I WAS BEING TOO
FORWARD ASKING YOU HERE FOR
WEEKEND BUT...
YOU'RE THE FIRST--
THE FIRST ONE I'VE
WANTED TO...















THANK YOU,
DIEGO.

FOR MAKING
MY--OUR-- FIRST
TIME PERFECT.

FIRST OF
MANY.

Beastiality

She had always been the naughty one.
"That Belle is a terror!" the people said.

With her father a prisoner in a cursed castle,
She alone dared to ride out and rescue him.
Belle faced the Beast with a stolen rose in her hair,
Its unwitting red as bright as blood against
The black curls. Then she licked her rouged lips
And, toying with the ribbons of her bodice,
Offered her flesh for her father's freedom.

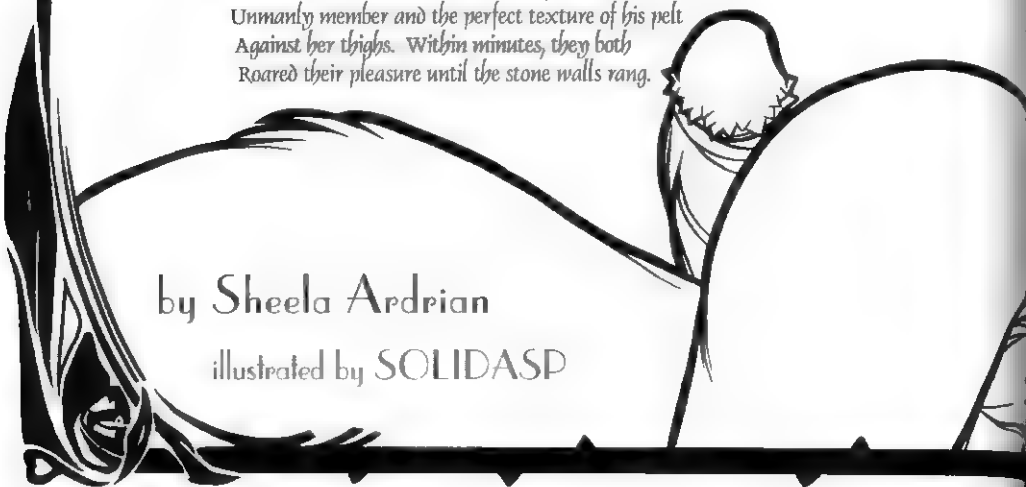
The Beast stammered and stepped back
And handed her the key. Belle tossed it
To her father through the dungeon bars.
With a laugh, she grabbed the Beast
And dragged him off to the nearest bedroom.

There Belle slipped out of her silken gown.
It puddled on the stone floor like flower petals.
She pulled the rose from her hair and slowly, slowly
Stroked the thorns across her naked breasts.
The Beast caught his breath at the scent of blood.
She let him wash his rough tongue over her skin
Until her nipples ached with ecstasy.

His cock rose rampant in his lap. Belle could barely
Close her hand around it. Thick and ridged it was,
With a ring of fine spines like a tomcat's.
Belle leaned down to flick her tongue along it, teasing.
The Beast growled low in his throat. Unable to wait
Any longer, he threw her to the bed and mounted her
From behind. Belle reveled in the rasp of his
Unmanly member and the perfect texture of his pelt
Against her thighs. Within minutes, they both
Roared their pleasure until the stone walls rang.

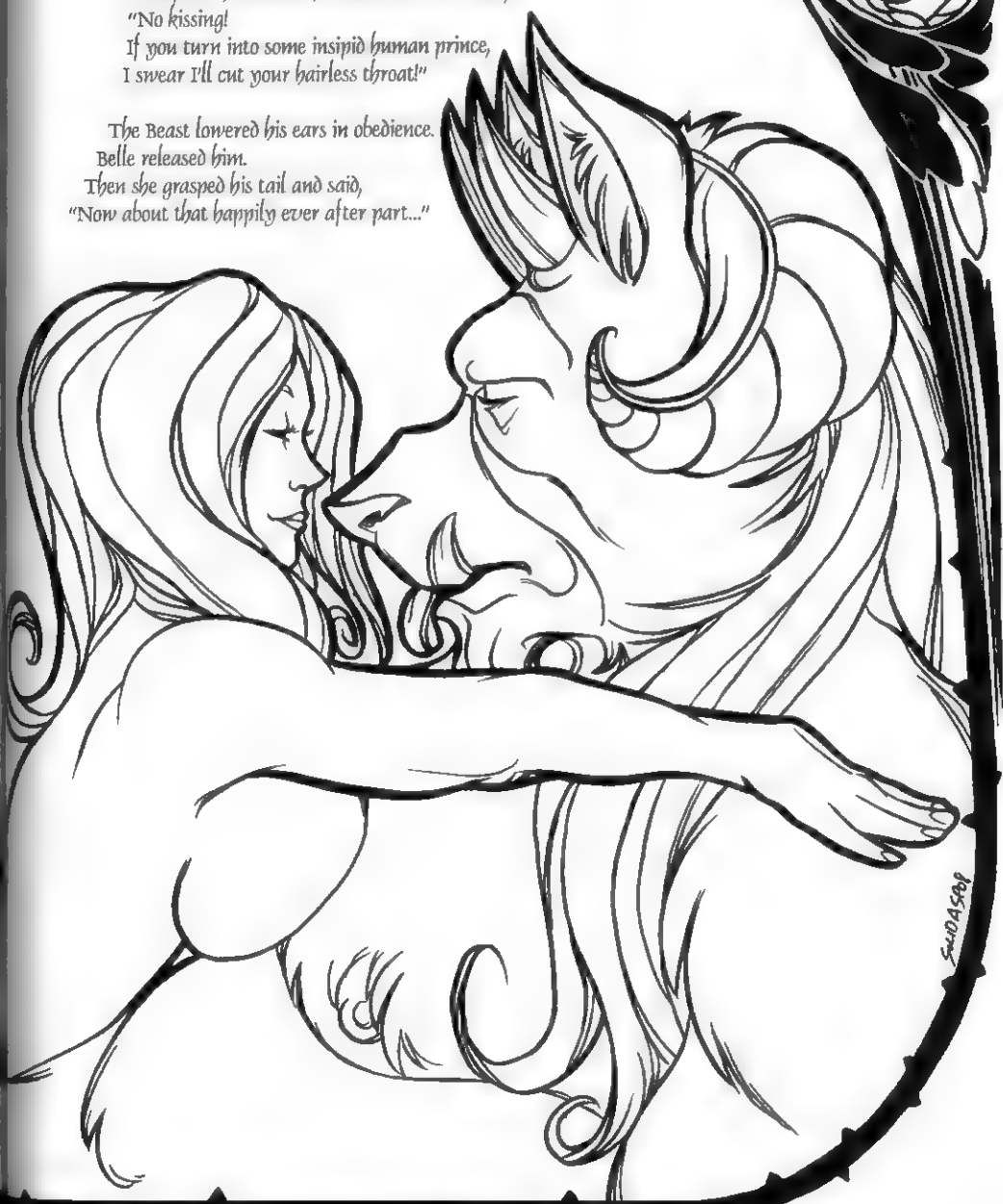
by Sheela Ardrian

illustrated by SOLIDASP



As they turned to face each other, the Beast
Leaned close to touch her lips — but Belle
Clamped a hand over his muzzle and snarled,
"No kissing!
If you turn into some insipid human prince,
I swear I'll cut your hairless throat!"

The Beast lowered his ears in obedience.
Belle released him.
Then she grasped his tail and said,
"Now about that happily ever after part..."



Third Date

by Kyell Gold



Steel Body Fitness, on Niven and Sixteenth, had been recommended to Rosco, not only for having the finest weight sets in the gay neighborhood, but also for having the finest selection of eye candy in all of Riviera. For two years after joining, he'd been on the spectator side of the gym, a figurative division that was as forceful as though it'd been literal. The black wolf told himself that he hadn't moved from White Plains just to see the life of the big city, but to be a part of it, so despite the disdain that the regulars showed to the spectators, he kept going.

He'd tried to put together a workout group among the spectators, who were all new to the gym. Nobody else was doing it, and Rosco was sure that the people here in the city would be more responsive than the people back in his hick hometown. For a couple months, he was right. Five days a week they met, encouraged each other, traded tips, and improved their top weights and their builds. Then Hank hit a plateau and got discouraged. Tyler had a new cub,

and never came back in the promised three weeks. New members joined, showed interest in his group, and dropped out within months, their names fading from his mind almost as fast.

Undaunted, Rosco carried on alone, becoming more reluctant to give advice and expend energy on people who were just going to give up anyway. He stopped meeting with his group, but continued to improve himself, raising his bench press over three (hundred) finally, two years and one month after his first day. Two weeks later, a raccoon meeting with him to approach him to ask for pointers on his form—a transparent attempt to ask him out on a date. He turned the raccoon down, of course. The guy had only benched two-ten.

For the next six months, he was an object of attention among the other spectators, who sensed that he might be more amenable to dating because he'd so recently been one of them. Though none of his propositioners were unattractive, he had either turned them down



outright or refused a second date from all of them. Sure, he'd known them and joked with them, but none of them had been going for as long or as regularly as he had. Having dedicated himself so fiercely to improving himself, he wanted to meet someone who shared that toughness.

The problem with the other side, the ones whose toughness and dedication were visible in the firm, clean lines under their fur, was that the nice guys were invariably not single, and the single guys usually weren't nice. Rosco went on three dates with Josh, an unusual arctic fox in a group mostly composed of large predators and ungulates, but apart from the striking visual contrast of black wolf and white fox, they did not make a very good couple. Josh was nice enough, but the sex was unremarkable and their interests too disparate for either of them to want to waste time taking things further.

They did remain gym friends, spotting each other when their schedules coincided. Being the only single gym rats who could carry on a decent conversation was the foundation of a good friendship, if not a relationship. They often pointed out the flaws in their fellow lifters before Rosco headed off to his art supply store job and Josh to his paralegal work.

It was Josh who first noticed the wolf, lifting alone in the corner. He jerked his head toward the corner when Rosco arrived to do his stretches. "Big Boy's back," the fox said.

"Huh?" Rosco saw a huge gray wolf, muscles bulging as he hefted a barbell over his head, held it there, then brought it casually down. The black wolf tried to count the plates. "Cripes. What's that, like four hundred?"

"Could be." Josh gulped some water. "He used to come here a couple times a week, back in oh-four. I guess he got bored with the selection."

"That wouldn't take long," Rosco muttered, eyes fixed on the wolf's arms and chest. He wore a loose black tank top and black shorts with yellow stripes down the hips, which allowed a nice view of his pecs and shoulders. He did a set of ten and then lowered the barbell, panting.

"We used to joke he was WonderWolf," Josh said.

"In Riviera?" Rosco looked again at the grey wolf. "I figured you'd get Red Lightning here, maybe Blackout. Don't WonderWolf and Vicious Vixen and them mostly stick to the coasts?"

Josh pulled a dumbbell to his chest, admired the curve of his bicep, and lowered it again. "That's what a 'joke' means. Don't they have those in White Plains?"

"Ha ha."

"Anyway, that was when I was studying the *Ling Scientific v. The League of Canids* case. Me, I think he's an Olympian. Probably disqualified for steroids. I mean, look at him."

"Yeah." Rosco rubbed his chin thoughtfully, brushing his whiskers. "Think he needs a spotter?"

Josh threw him a look. "Who could spot that? Anyway, I asked already."

"Maybe he's a specialist. Or maybe he just wants someone who can bench three."

The fox rolled his eyes. "Go. It'll be fun watching you get shot down."

The black wolf grinned and blew a kiss down at the bench. "Thanks." He grabbed his towel and strolled over to the corner.

He hadn't realized, from across the gym, how huge the wolf really was. He overwhelmed the weight bench, the barbells like plastic toys in his paws. Rosco saw the plates move clearly now: at least four hundred, maybe five. He'd never been great at doing math in his head. The strain showed in the wolf's expression, a theatrical grimace with eyes squeezed shut as he hefted the barbell again. His nose twitched as Rosco watched. "Just a sec," he grunted. Slowly, he lowered the weight to the floor.

"What's that, five?" Rosco asked, using the higher end of his estimate to try to flatter the wolf.

"Five and a quarter," the wolf said. He looked up, startling Rosco with the clarity of his eyes, an otherworldly sapphire blue. "What do you bench?"

"Uh, three. And a quarter," he added, mentally assuring himself that if he had to, he could live up to those words.

"Not bad." The wolf wore black fingerless gloves, too. He adjusted the straps. "Been coming here long?"

"Two years." Rosco fidgeted. There was something unsettling about the wolf's tone, a lack of excitement at what should be an engaging flirtation. If he weren't aware of Josh's eyes on him, he would've taken the implicit hint and retreated to his workout. "You're new here."

"Just back in town," the wolf said. "I travel a lot."

"Well," Rosco said in a rush, "there's a couple places over on the Calico Mall that just opened in the last six months...some nice restaurants and clubs. You oughta catch up on them. If you're just back, I mean."

Those deep blue eyes regarded him again. Black lips curved up very slightly. "I wouldn't know which ones are good and which ones aren't."

"Oh," Rosco said, "I'd be happy to show you." When the wolf didn't react, he said, "Or, uh, I could write down some names."

The smile became more pronounced. "Why don't you show me? Say, Friday night, sevenish, outside here."

"Sure!" Rosco broke into a grin himself. "What kind of food do you like?"

"I'm not picky. Somewhere where we don't need a reservation." He bent back to his barbell.

"Cool. Yeah. Okay. Um, I'm Rosco." He stuck out a paw, then pulled it back, because the other wolf had already started to lift the weight again.

"Drew," the grey wolf said, bringing the barbell to his chest. "I'll see you Friday. Oh, and tell your friend the fox I'm not a speciesist. He just needs to get a better pickup line than 'is it hot in here, or is it just you?'"



By Friday, Josh was sick of being teased about the line, and about Rosco's success, even though they didn't see Drew in the gym again all week. Maybe he was going in the evenings, Rosco thought, and had made the date for the end of his workout. On Friday at seven, though, the wolf walked up from outside, in a casual sportcoat and slacks that disguised his height. Only when he got closer did Rosco see that Drew was at least half a foot taller than his six-one. He still moved with confidence and graceful ease, winding his way between the trees on the sidewalk like a slalom.

The sportcoat looked expensive, in that "carefully tailored to look casual" kind of way. Rosco felt underdressed in his polo shirt and jeans, but Drew didn't comment, just stuck out his massive grey paw and said, "Where to?"

They took his motorbike, a Dunston 450 with turbo and room on the back for Rosco to perch. Because Drew rode without a helmet, Rosco declined even when the grey wolf of-

fered. "If you don't need one, I trust you," he said recklessly.

"I won't let you get hurt," Drew said, and Rosco, though he knew he was doing a stupid thing, believed him. On the back of the bike, wind flattening his fur as they tore through the streets of Riviera, he felt as though he were flying in a dream. *Got to get me one of these one day*, he noted to himself. Much better than riding his mountain bike everywhere.

The dinner at Venici went well, the dancing at Paradise Alley even better. Drew asked a lot of questions about Rosco's college education, why a sociology major was working in an art supply store, and why he felt so determined to lift. Rosco talked about improving himself and wanting to help improve others, how discouraged he'd gotten in the city, and his hobby of painting watercolors. "The job is just to get the discount on paints," he said, "because my paintings aren't good enough to sell yet. What about you?"

Drew showed him a sleek black pager. "EMT," he said. "I know all about helping people. Apologies in advance if I get beeped. I'll drop you at home first if that happens."

"I can take the bus," Rosco waved in the direction of the tree-lined boulevard that was the main artery of the Calico Mall.

He didn't have to. At one-thirty, Drew drove him back to the gym and said casually that maybe the following Friday they should try the new Indian place they'd walked past. After a spicy meal and more dancing the next week, they sat in a 24-hour coffee shop until four a.m., and when they got back to the deserted gym parking lot, Drew wrapped his arms around Rosco and touched his muzzle to the black wolf's. Rosco pressed back against the warm, hard body and parted his muzzle, allowing a little more depth to the kiss. Their tongues touched, as they stood under the shadow of the trees, and then Drew broke the kiss and stepped back into the moonlight.

The two smiled at each other. Rosco knew, in that moment, that the promise of more on the third date had been made and agreed to on both sides. "How about the steakhouse next week?" he said.

"It's a date," Drew said, raising a paw as he got back on his bike.

Josh had almost stopped talking to Rosco, but at the news that he was going on a third date with Big Boy, the white fox's vicarious

excitement overcame his resentment. "Promise you'll tell," he insisted. "We have an implicit contract in our friendship to reveal any and all salacious stories to each other."

"You haven't told me any stories in months."

"I haven't *had* any," the fox protested.

"What about that giraffe?" Rosco said.

Josh shrugged. "He could suck me off from across the room. Big deal. This is Big Boy we're talking about."

"I dunno," Rosco said, more to tease than anything else.

"If you don't," Josh said warningly, waving a paw around at the rest of the gym, "I'll tell all the rest of these guys about your date, and you'll be pestered every time you come in."

"You do that anyway."

"Yeah, but I use complete sentences and polysyllabic words."

"Too many words, if you ask me."

"Okay, fine, you can paint me a picture if you want. I'll accept any form of artistic rendering, verbal or graphic. The more graphic the better." The fox grinned widely.

"We'll see," Rosco said, but of course he knew he wouldn't be able to resist. He could talk art with the store staff, but they (amazingly) were all straight, and besides that, they preferred talking about visits to the museum and the latest modernist movement to talking about their social lives. Josh was the friend who would appreciate date stories, and what was a good date without someone to tell the story to? Rosco'd already told Josh about Drew's voracious appetite and fastidious table manners, about his conversational habit of pausing as though he were checking everything he said before saying it, about his interest in painting and in social theory, about his motorcycle and his almost boundless energy.

"Where are you guys going to go?" Josh asked.

"Don't know," Rosco lowered his voice. "I kinda blew my budget on the last two weeks. Know anyplace good and cheap?"

"For the amount he eats? You could go to Fields and just have a big salad."

"I'm not sure he's a salad kind of guy." They happened to be watching Drew work out that morning, the only day of the week he visited Steel Body. Both of them looked over at the wolf, now doing squats.

Josh said, with not a little envy, "He lifts that five and a quarter like it was nothing."

"Yeah." Rosco's experience with the wolf made him feel as though he should be able to offer some extra insight, but none came to mind, so he just enjoyed the sense of being an insider as he watched Drew heft the barbell over and over.

"He doesn't do regular sets, either," Josh mused.

"What?" Rosco turned to the fox.

Josh shrugged. "I mean, there's all kinds of workouts, but he always just does that five and a quarter. Ten, ten, ten, all his exercises."

Rosco looked back at the wolf. "Maybe he doesn't need to ramp any more."

"You always need to ramp," Josh said. "I'm telling you, he's an Olympian who was deequed. He doesn't want to bench as much as he can, for fear of compromising his disguise and instigating inquiries into his sordid past."

"You're just jealous," Rosco said.

"Hell, yes," Josh said. "I wish I had an Olympian weightlifter boyfriend with a sordid past."

Rosco flushed at the word "boyfriend". "We're just dating," he mumbled.

"Yeah, yeah," Josh picked up the barbell and stood. He bent over, lowering it to the ground. "Don't tell me you haven't thought it."

He had, of course, in the nights alone in his bed while his paw worked furiously on his sheath, imagining Drew's body atop his, even thinking of the larger wolf when he passed a nice restaurant or a club on his rides around the city. He worried sometimes that the wolf wouldn't want to date someone who couldn't afford to go to the Calico Mall every week. Then he worried that the wolf went there with others, on non-Friday nights.

That worry never took, though. Something about the wolf's demeanor made Rosco sure that he wasn't dating anyone else. He hoped that he conveyed that about himself as well.

The following Friday, Drew met him at the gym and surprised him by saying, "You know, as much as I love the Calico Mall, it's a little expensive for an EMT. How about we just do Colonel Chicken takeout and have a picnic?"

"Sure," Rosco said. "That sounds awesome."

"Cool." Drew grinned. "I know a great park we'll have all to ourselves."

"Really?" Rosco tried to imagine a park in the bustling city of Riviera that would have a chance of being deserted. "I thought you'd just got back in town."

"Well, this is a bit outside of town," Drew said. "But it's only about fifteen minutes on my bike. If you can hold on."

Rosco stepped forward and put his paws on the larger wolf's sides, just above the hips. "Long as I have something to hold on to."

Drew leaned down and bumped noses. "We're set, then. Let's go."

Between them, they got four buckets of chicken; a stack of biscuits; a pint each of mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, and coleslaw; and a half-dozen chocolate chip cookies. Drew handed the immense bag to Rosco, who stuck his arm through the handles and got on the back of the bike. He held onto Drew's sides as the grey wolf kicked the starter. The bike roared to life, but Drew didn't take off right away.

"Do me a favor," he said. "Close your eyes?"

"For fifteen minutes?" Rosco said, thinking he was joking. "Where are you taking me?"

The grey muzzle didn't smile. "It's kind of a secret place."

"Oh." Now Rosco felt like an idiot for not taking him seriously. "Uh, sure."

It made sense, he thought, squeezing his eyes shut as they roared through the streets, that if there were a place Drew knew that they wouldn't be disturbed, he wouldn't want everyone to know how to get there. And he obviously trusted Rosco enough to keep his word that he hadn't insisted on a blindfold or anything, so Rosco didn't mind. His heart was racing fast enough in anticipation of the rest of the evening that he didn't need the rush of scenery going by. He could feel the wind against his ears, and flattened them against his head to keep the roaring to a minimum. It felt like Drew was going faster than usual. Maybe he wanted Rosco to close his eyes because he didn't want him to get nervous at how fast they were going.

The Dunstan was a great bike, though. He could barely feel the road as they tore through streets, around curves, the wind blocking out all other sound, except when Drew turned to ask him, "Doing okay?" His voice was barely audible.

He yelled back, "Yeah!" though he wasn't sure whether the other wolf could even hear him over the wind.

He knew when they turned onto the dirt road, though. Drew had slowed, so Rosco could hear the crunch of dirt under the tires as well as feel it in his butt. For two or three more minutes they drove slowly, the smell of trees and woodland filtering through the smell of wolf to Rosco's nose, and then they stopped.

"You can open your eyes," he heard Drew say, but he unflattened his ears first. He heard silence, which broke into the chirps of insects, the tired sunset songs of birds, and the rustling of small animals in the undergrowth. He opened his eyes to Drew's blue eyes, reflecting the bright orange spot of the sunset. Behind them, tinged with evening purple, the equally blue sky framed trees incandescent with golden light, to either side of a small lake. The smell of the park, the rich life of the lake, and the steady woody aroma of the trees reminded him of White Plains for a moment.

"You like it?" Drew said, eyebrows knitted together.

"I want to paint it," Rosco said, after a moment. "I grew up near someplace like this."

"Hattenville?" Drew said, with an edge of disbelief.

"No, no, White Plains," Rosco said. He waved at the lake. "Not as pretty as this, but lots of park land. If this were White Plains, there'd be a trail of beer cans leading back along the trail." He looked back behind the bike, but didn't see a marked trail there. "Is this Hattenville? Did you grow up here?"

"No." Drew looked relieved. "Hattenville's not too far from here. It's just a place I know."

"It's really pretty. You take lots of dates here?" Rosco smiled to let the other know he wasn't really jealous.

Drew nodded, smiling back. "The ones I like."

"So, third dates only?"

"And beyond." Drew grabbed him and pulled him close, and this time they kissed for a long time, enjoying the full press of their bodies against each other. Rosco had both paws inside Drew's sport coat, firmly around the larger wolf's hips, while Drew's paws gripped his lower back through his t-shirt. He tightened his stomach against the ridge of the other wolf's groin and rubbed his own into Drew's leg.

They were both hard, Rosco's neck starting to hurt from being craned up, when his stomach rumbled. Drew must have been able to feel it through his erection, because he broke the kiss

and grinned down. "Maybe we should break for dinner?"

"Mmm," Rosco felt his tail wagging, his smile wide. "Sure. Before it gets cold."

"Might be too late for that," Drew said, but the insulated containers had worked fairly well. They devoured the greasy, delectable chicken, sitting on the grassy shore of the lake next to each other, knees touching, arms brushing as they ate. They polished off most of the chicken and devoured the side dishes, and then lay back in the grass, side by side, licking their muzzles and paws.

"It's not Venici," Drew said, "but it's pretty good."

"Glad it doesn't have to be Venici every night," Rosco said.

"Nah," Drew stretched, and finished the motion with an arm around Rosco's shoulder. Rosco leaned into the embrace, feeling his stomach twitch with butterflies rather than hunger now. "It's a nice night," Drew said. "And I've really enjoyed spending time with you."

"Me too." Rosco reached into the grey wolf's sport coat, in through his shirt, and traced his claws through the soft fur. Food had dulled the urgency of his passion, but not the desire. The feel of Drew's bare fur and the warm skin below it excited him, but in a warm, slow way rather than the rush of lust that had been brought on by their kiss.

The large wolf rumbled softly against him, bringing his own claws down to Rosco's belly, lifting the shirt so he could slide his claws slowly along the black-furred tummy. Rosco shivered at the light touch, leaning closer in and moving his paw further into the soft shirt. Feeling the thick cords of muscle around Drew's ribcage excited him further, both because he admired them and because they stood for the other wolf's toughness. It occurred to him that you probably couldn't get muscles like that working out one day a week. Resting his head against Drew's chest, he said, "Can I ask you something?"

The other wolf tensed. His paw froze on Rosco's belly. "Sure," he said, after a moment.

Rosco paused, reconsidering his question. Drew hadn't gotten this nervous about any of their questions before, and some of them had been pretty personal—ex-lovers, and such. Finally, he decided there was no way Drew could know what he'd been going to ask, so he went ahead and asked. "Are you a hopper?"

He felt the muscles under his paws relax. Drew rubbed his belly again, with a little too much force at first. "A what?"

"A gym-hopper. You know those guys who go to, like, six different gyms just to scope out the people there?"

The other wolf sounded amused. "I suppose you could say that. But I've only been going to Steel Body the last month. I'm more of a serial hopper, I guess."

Rosco undid one of the shirt buttons with what he hoped was casual ease. He ran his fingers along the lower edge of the wolf's ribcage. "You've got a great body, for only going once a week."

"I work out at home a lot," Drew said.

His abs were hard as rocks. No wonder, the position he was in, supporting Rosco with one arm and caressing his stomach with the other. "I'd love to have a home gym," Rosco said, "but right now I don't have room even if I could afford it."

"Oh," Drew said, "yeah, I just have some free weights. I mean, like a weight bench." His paw paused while he talked, then resumed its touch. There was something a little odd about the tone of his answer, as though he had been distracted.

"There's something nice about going out to the gym, though." Rosco let his mind wander with his paw, tracing firm ridges under soft grey fur while he thought. "I mean, it forces me to get out and deal with people."

"Didn't you study sociology?" Drew sounded amused, more firmly in the conversation now. His fingers pushed Rosco's shirt up further.

Rosco sighed. "Yeah. I wanted to..." The words "help people" trailed off before he could speak them. Here in this isolated place, with this big, solid wolf to nestle against, his stock phrases didn't feel sufficient. "I always felt different. I felt like I could see the things all my friends were doing wrong, but none of them would listen to me. At the time...y'know, this was White Plains, where flannel is high fashion...at the time, I just thought they were all stupid. So I took sosh so that people would listen to me when I told them what they were doing wrong, and I moved to the city to be around smarter people who didn't make those mistakes."

The lapping of the lake filled the silence that followed his remark. A breeze had come up as the sun sank below the trees, ruffling his ears. He rested his muzzle against Drew's chest,

feeling lighter. When Drew didn't say anything, Rosco felt he had to conclude, "But, y'know, the people in the city aren't smarter. There's just more of them."

"But," Drew said, "the people in the art store sound cool. And you have at least one friend in the gym."

"Josh is okay," Rosco admitted. "Yeah, there are cool people. I mean, the city's not a total waste. Just depressing sometimes."

"I know what you mean," Drew said. "I feel like an outsider too. It's hard to find people to really relate to. But that doesn't mean they don't need help."

Rosco started to say, "you found me," but that sounded too pretentious and mushy for the moment, so he contented himself with undoing another button, then flattening his paw warmly on the wolf's stomach fur. Drew squeezed him with a powerful arm, and went on. "I think I try to help people because I want them to like me."

"That's probably not a great reason."

Drew sighed. "I know. But they still get helped, right? So does it matter?"

"Did you have a lot of friends, growing up?" Rosco said. He vaguely remembered a large kid from his elementary school who had been called "Mammoth" and other, less kind names.

"Not really. I got teased a lot." Drew smoothed his fur, ruffled it, and smoothed it again. His fingers played with Rosco's pants, edging a claw along the fabric and the fur beneath.

"That sucks." Rosco took a breath and let his paw slip further down the ridges of Drew's tummy, playing with the ridge of the wolf's hips, aware of the warmth of the nearby sheath, keeping his paw away from it. For now. His own sheath was pretty full, the anticipation of what was hopefully to come filling him with shivering that had nothing to do with the breeze. The light was fading faster now, and in the dim twilight, the sense that they were alone in the world crept up on Rosco. Wouldn't be so bad, he thought, just the two of us. "How did you find this place?"

"Saw it while flying over," Drew said. "I mean, in a copter. Figured out how to get here on the bike. The turn-off is kinda hard to see."

That wasn't the only thing that was hard, Rosco thought, as Drew's claws continued to tease just below the waist of his pants. "I can't see any turn-offs," he said, pushing his muzzle

a little further against Drew's shirt to where it hung open, just brushing the ivory chest fur with his nose.

Drew rumbled contentedly, the sound almost like an earthquake under Rosco's cheek. His paw slid a little further down, finding the black wolf's hardness and exploring it lightly with just the tip of a claw. Rosco sighed happily to let him know the caress was okay, good even. He moved to unfasten the grey wolf's pants, not to brush the other's sheath in return, but so he could follow the line of his hip, the ridge of strong thigh muscles down the leg. He let Drew take the lead, shivering as the gentle fingers traced his outlines with claws, then pads.

"What do you like?" Drew murmured down to him.

Rosco grinned at the hesitant note. It felt good to know he wasn't alone in being nervous around new lovers. "This," he said.

"I mean," and now he heard the wolf relax, chuckle softly, "clothes off or on? Paw or..."

"Whatever you like," Rosco said. "Are people really picky?" But as he said that, he remembered Josh, who had to put a towel down on the bed before they even undressed, who interrupted to tell him how to adjust his grip, who practically gave him an eye doctor's "A or B?" until Rosco told him that either one was preferable to being asked over and over again.

"Some are." Drew chuckled again, his paw closing around Rosco's sheath and sliding up the long, firm shaft. "You'd be surprised." He slid his paw lightly up and down, and nuzzled Rosco's ears. "I like clothes off."

The black wolf grinned, and stuck his muzzle into Drew's shirt, rubbing his nose into the fur. "Fair enough." Rather than removing his own shirt, he slid his paw back up, undoing the rest of the buttons on Drew's and pushing the sleeves back over those massive biceps. The grey wolf watched him with amusement, letting go of his shaft only when he needed to let the shirt fall to the ground.

"Now you," he said, pushing Rosco down. He lifted the shirt over the black wolf's head, and then deftly unfastened and pulled his pants and boxers down over his ankles. Rosco watched Drew's eyes and smile widen as the smaller wolf's hard black shaft slid free to lie on his black belly fur. "Black all over?" Drew said.

Rosco indicated the white patch just under his chin. "Except for here, and, um..." Flicking

his ears slightly, he turned onto his side to show off the white fur under his tail.

He heard Drew's chuckle, and for a moment wondered if the other wolf would just take him from behind. Thoughts flashed through his mind: how would it feel? Did he want it? They disappeared as Drew put a paw gently on his hip to return him to his back. "Very pretty," he said, and tossed Rosco's clothes into a pile.

When Rosco reached for Drew's pants, the larger wolf moved his paw aside. "Later," he said, and bent to nuzzle Rosco's sac. The black wolf lay back, looking up at the darkening sky in which new stars seemed to appear every time he looked, like the little jolts of

desire that sparked with each touch on his sac and shaft. Like the stars, they accumulated inside him. He felt Drew's warm breath and then a firm, powerful tongue stroking him while paws held his legs down.

The motion of the tongue was like nothing he'd felt before, as strong and firm as a paw slick with lube. He hadn't thought he could come just from being licked, but each



stroke of the tongue made him squirm and pant, his shaft tingling and pulsing. He arched his back, straining against those powerful paws on his legs, and amazingly (or perhaps not) he could not budge them, not an inch.

The restraint made it better, as his trapped muscles redirected their energy to his arousal. Resting back on his elbows was soon no longer possible under the attention of that tongue, whose licks traveled all the way up his spine and down to the tip of his tail. He felt the familiar gathering surge, gasped out a moaned warning, and then arched his back and thrust up, into the waiting muzzle of the grey wolf. Lips closed fast around his shaft, sucking as he came, while the paws held him fast to the ground.

He fell back with a gasp, panting as he stared up at the blanket of stars in the sky above him. They danced in his vision for a space, until two deep blue eyes obscured them. "Okay?" Drew's body loomed over him, barely touching, his presence strong and warm.

"Hell, yeah," Rosco panted. He ran his paws up the arms planted to the ground on either side of him. "That was fine." He grinned to show the understatement, tongue lolling out.

"Good." Drew smiled as Rosco's paws found their way down his sides to his pants, pushing the fabric down insistently. The grey wolf's sheath appeared, but Rosco didn't see it, only felt the tip brush his sac as it dropped between his legs. He squeezed his legs together, feeling the hard shape between them.

Drew got up to let Rosco push his pants down further, giving the black wolf his first view of the long, red member between his legs. Rosco made a show of appreciating it, sliding the pants down slowly, then looked up as he felt a lump in one of the pockets that was suspiciously pager-sized. "You're on call tonight?"

"Not really. I mean, always, but I'm supposed to be off." The grey wolf rubbed Rosco's ears, shaking his legs free of the pants. "Don't worry. If it goes off, I'll drop you off."

"Long as it doesn't go off in the next half hour." Rosco smiled, sitting up and brushing his paws down the sides of the other wolf, over the hips and around the firmly shaped thighs, to where Drew's knees rested on the ground on either side of his legs. The warm glow of his climax made his movements slow and easy, as he traced claws up the grey-furred thighs along the inside, slowly approaching the dangling white sac and the heavy red shaft above it. He

teased the white fur with a claw, then slid up to the firm base and up further, where fur gave way to flesh.

Drew closed his eyes and shivered very nicely as Rosco wrapped a black paw around his length, leaning back on his other arm. The warmth between the two of them, trapped between their fur, insulated them nicely from the evening chill. Rosco closed his eyes, lifting his nose to drink in the scent of trees, the water, Drew's musk growing stronger to match his own. The crushed grass below his paw reminded him of the meadows near his home, where he would lie back alone until his mother's calls for dinner reached his ears.

"Rosco."

He paused his paw's motion and opened his eyes. Drew smiled down at him, tentatively. "I'm a little...funny in what I like." He brought one paw up to ruffle the fur on Rosco's chest, then smoothed it back down.

Uh-oh, Rosco thought. Here comes the kicker. He perked his ears. "Funny like 'ha-ha,' or funny like 'I could get arrested for this'?" As he made the joke, he looked around again at the isolated surroundings, the motorcycle resting against a nearby tree, and the joke seemed a lot less funny. He swiveled his ears, but caught no sound louder than the rustling of leaves or mice, no traffic or noise. It was probably safe to assume that if he couldn't hear anyone, nobody could hear him.

"Just funny like quirky," Drew said. He stood, lowering a paw to help Rosco up. For a moment they stood, eyes meeting, and then Drew licked Rosco's nose quickly. He turned around and pulled the black wolf's arms around him. "I like it from behind," he said over his shoulder.

Rosco could feel Drew's heartbeat, a jackhammer in the barrel chest. It comforted him to know how nervous the other was to be sharing this with him. "Okay," he said. "That's not so quirky."

Drew sank slowly to his knees. "How about if you kneel on the backs of my legs?"

The black wolf followed him down. "That's a little strange." He grinned. "You like to be ridden?"

"Sort of." Drew held his legs together, making it easy for Rosco to climb up on them. He reached down and around, finding the grey wolf's shaft still very hard.

"Ooh," he said. "You *do* like this."

Drew chuckled, with a nervous or excited tremor in the laugh. "Told you," he said, holding onto Rosco's other paw.

"Something tells me," Rosco murmured as he kept stroking, "that this won't take very long."

"No," Drew breathed, "probably not."

"I kind of like this too," Rosco said softly, his paw moving nice and slow to start. "I get to be nice and close to all these beautiful muscles...soft fur...this lovely scent you have... so unusual."

"Un...usual?" Drew panted. His body shifted, tensing and then relaxing.

Rosco inhaled. "Yeah. Everybody in White Plains kinda has the same scent at the bottom, you know? Sort of a mix of the fertilizer and poultry on the farms, and the loam and phosphorus in the soil, and the white oak and chestnut forest. You've got, mmm, some nice spices there to your musk." His paw worked faster, his own body starting to get into the rhythm, rubbing his bare chest and stomach up against the grey wolf's broad back. He could feel the quick breaths in the other wolf's body, as the fluffy tail curled up between Rosco's legs. He trapped it there, enjoying the shivers as it tried to wag.

The night seemed to close around them, the breeze growing stronger. Drew moaned his name back softly; Rosco heard it for an instant before the wind snatched it away. The hardness under his pads quivered, hot and slick as he stroked it. He could feel the sensations it sent through the large wolf under his knees with each pump of his paw, could feel the groans and staccato pants, and lost himself in the climb toward release.

He saw stars in front of him as Drew gasped and clutched more tightly at his paw, gripping it almost painfully. Then the grip did become painful, but no matter how much he wrenched his paw, he could not free it. He pulled himself more tightly to the other's rippling back, muzzle lodged between Drew's shoulder and neck. He could smell, could feel the growing arousal as his paw rode up and down the long shaft. It was no surprise to him when he felt the howl building in Drew's chest, when the body encircled in his arms shuddered and Drew's head snapped back onto Rosco's shoulder, because he could almost feel the climax coming himself.

Rosco felt the convulsions in the wolf's erect member, strong ripples under his pads, stronger than any climax he'd ever felt. The grey

wolf let loose with a long, low howl, vibrating through his chest and Rosco's body. It made the black wolf's fur prickle in sympathy, brought a reflexive response to his throat. Before he could fully voice it, Drew's howl broke off into panting moans. The legs he was resting on swung forward, taking Rosco's support out from under him. The black wolf's legs dropped as well, questing for the ground and, impossibly, not finding it. Drew held him by the paw as he started to fall.

"Hey," he yelped. Drew moaned, shook again, and the ground came up to meet their paws.

Standing there on the cool grass, panting from the exertion, Rosco could almost believe he'd imagined that they were floating in the air. His paw was still clenched tightly around the warm hardness of Drew's erection, and they were both panting in the night air. It seemed as though nothing more unusual had happened than a nice paw job in a remote lake somewhere.

"What just happened?" he said, staying pressed close to Drew because it was more scary to move away, his hind paws still remembering the impossible nothingness under them. Also, the grey wolf hadn't let go of Rosco's paw yet, and though the grip was no longer painful, he still wasn't able to loosen it.

Drew sighed. He turned to face the smaller wolf, hanging his head. "Sorry," he said. He nuzzled between Rosco's ears, until Rosco pulled his head back to stare up.

"You're...we were flying." He peered up at the shapely muzzle, then down at the sculpted, naked physique. Light dawned. "*WonderWolf*?"

Now the eyes opened, impossibly blue in the dark of night. "I hoped you wouldn't notice until we were back on the ground."

"We were flying," Rosco repeated. "How high?" He could only remember staring at the stars above him, the night blackness all around.

"Just thirty feet or so. You wouldn't have been hurt. I wouldn't have let go of you." He squeezed Rosco's paw and then, as if just realizing he was still holding it, let go.

Rosco stepped back, looking at the grey and ivory body, and started to grin. "*WonderWolf*," he said, and slowly, his paw released the long, red shaft. "I just pawed off a Malakorian."

That just seemed to make Drew—*WonderWolf*—more uncomfortable. He looked at the

ground and fidgeted. "Actually, uh, that's just the comics. They don't really know where I'm from."

"Oh," Rosco looked away, to the blackness of the forest. "Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I mean, uh, hang on." He walked over to his pants and pulled out the small device he'd said was a pager. "You're gonna have to sign a bunch of forms now, and..." He cocked an ear. "Oh, spit. I need to go."

Rosco followed him to the motorcycle, where he pulled out a jumpsuit that Rosco recognized immediately: the tight black fabric with yellow sleeves and trim and the "Double-Double-U" logo in a circle in the center. He stepped easily into it and pulled a domino mask out of his pocket, fastening it across his eyes. "Distress signal?" Rosco said.

"Actually, I, uh, it sounds like I shot down a plane." When Rosco stared at him, he said, "Just now. Got about thirty seconds to get to it." He kissed Rosco on the nose. "Stay here. Some folks from the League will be here soon. You might wanna get your clothes on." He bent at the knees and then flashed into the sky, leaving the words, "I had fun" behind him on the breeze.

The import of the words before that sank in as Rosco wandered back to his clothes. Shot down a plane. With his... The black wolf sat down, caught between giggling and terror. Imagine if he'd tried to suck off WonderWolf? He'd have a hole in his head right now. No wonder his paw wasn't sticky. He stared at it, trying to imagine firing off a round that could take down a plane. With a wolf-penis-shaped gun. The giggles won at that image. Of course, WonderWolf wouldn't have let that happen. He was so gentle, for someone with such powers. And now it all made sense: his secrecy, his carelessness with five hundred pound weights, his nervousness about being different. His dedication to helping people—well, his dedication, period.

The night was not too chilly, and Rosco was enjoying the breeze on his fur. He figured he'd hear the approach of the League people, and in the back of his mind he thought that WonderWolf might be back before they arrived. So he sprawled back on his elbows, naked, thinking again about Drew and how he felt, and how the knowledge of his identity changed things. Idly, he flexed his stomach, looked down at his sheath and remembered Drew licking there. He

smiled. Heck, who wouldn't want to say he'd bedded WonderWolf? But was it the sort of thing he wanted to keep doing? It would involve him in all kinds of things that he had no experience with, not to mention sex being fairly dangerous all on its own.

On the other paw, of course, they'd been flying. He smiled at that memory. And the wolf had a soft streak that appealed to Rosco, a caring nature and an honest one. That was pretty rare.

"He's the cutest one in a while."

He caught the scents a moment later, coyote and wolf. When he turned, he saw a masked coyote in a black and yellow jumpsuit similar to WonderWolf's standing next to a small light grey female wolf in a business suit, holding a briefcase. Rosco dove for his pants. "We've already seen it," the wolf's light voice said as he scrambled into them.

"And taken our mental pictures."

"Hush, Blink," the wolf said. Rosco thought, at least that explains why I didn't hear them. The wolf walked toward him. "I'm Stormy Devoe, public relations, League of Canids. And this is..."

"Blink Coyote," Rosco said, standing to fasten his pants. He stared at the coyote's



emblem, a stylized eye. The coyote gave him an exaggerated bow.

"Yes." From the wolf's briefcase, she pulled a sheaf of papers. "Now. Having been made privy to the secret identity of WonderWolf, or at least having seen him without his mask on..."

"Or anything else," Blink chimed in.

"...we need you to sign this NDA, this confidentiality agreement, and this injunction. It prevents you from working with or in the presence of anyone identified by the League as a 'super-villain' for the next twenty years. Also there's this one last form."

Rosco stared at the paper. "All this is just to stop me revealing his identity?"

"Yes." Stormy produced a pen and handed the stack of paper to him. "Blink? A light?"

"Oh, sorry." Empty air filled the space where the coyote had been with a soft "pop". His after-image had just faded from Rosco's vision when he popped back, holding a large lantern that cast a soft glow around it.

In the soft glow, Rosco shuffled through the stream of small print, catching the boldfaced headlines. Stormy produced another pen from her pocket and tapped five small sticky tabs protruding from the stack of paper. "Here's where you have to sign. Here, here, and here, and initial here, and then sign this."

"I want to see a lawyer about this," Rosco said, more because he felt he should say that than because he really suspected them of trying to put one over on him.

"I wish people would stop watching cop movies," Blink said.

Stormy's ears flicked. She gave him an almost apologetic smile. "Well, here's the thing," she said. "These forms are mostly formalities to protect us under the laws of this country, and to allow you to stand trial in the International Court if you violate any of the agreements. Actually, we are an independent private organization operating in this country with the permission of your government. Along with that permission goes a certain leeway with respect to the rights of the citizens."

"We can lock people up," Blink said. "Super-villains, henchmen, people like that, you know."

"The point is," Stormy said, "that it's left up to us to determine who needs to be 'locked up'. Someone who's in possession of secret identity information, but who's signed these papers, is

not a threat to us." She tapped the sticky notes again, and looked up at Rosco.



"So what happened?" Josh asked him.

Rosco'd shown up late Monday morning, catching the white fox on his way out. He fell in next to Josh, shrugging. "I can't tell you." The newspaper in the kiosk they were passing read, *WonderWolf Saves Plane From Mystery Accident*, with a picture of Moxey Nightwing on the byline.

"Come on," Josh said. "It was your third date. Did you go all the way?"

"Well..." Rosco grinned. "Yeah."

"And?"

"I can't tell you."

Josh punched him on the shoulder. "Why not? Did he make you sign an NDA?"

"Actually...yeah."

The fox's eyes widened. "You're kidding. He made you sign an NDA about sex?"

"It's more complicated than that. There was some other stuff."

"I'd hope so." They reached Josh's car. "So, are you going to see him again?"

"Not sure." Rosco leaned against the adjacent car.

Josh unlocked his. "You've already signed the NDA. Might as well, huh?"

That wasn't what Rosco'd meant, but he nodded. "Yeah, I guess."

The white fox paused with the door open. "So, this NDA. Was it, like, two pages?"

"More like fourteen."

Josh closed his eyes. "Oh, man. Did it have... subsections?"

Rosco grinned. "Big, wordy subsections."

"Ohhhhhh." The fox's tongue lolled out of his short white muzzle. "And disclaimers?"

"One big one. At least three inches."

"Oh, Fox." Josh put a paw to his chest. "You are one lucky wolf."

Rosco laughed. "Go home. I'll see ya tomorrow morning."

He walked to the gym, thinking about that last form they'd had him sign, and wondering whether he would see Drew again. Going through his usual workout, his eyes kept drifting to the corner where Drew usually sat, but the grey wolf didn't come in that morning.

Josh teased Rosco about the paperwork the next day, but let it go after that. He fell back on

mocking the watchers. Friday morning, there was a weasel struggling with the dumbbells. "Bet he gives up after two more sessions," the fox said.

Normally, that was Rosco's cue to offer his estimate of the weasel's dedication. He found the remark, but it died on his lips. Drew—WonderWolf—hadn't come in all week, but something he had said nagged at Rosco's mind. He thought about how he'd written off all the people in the city as idiots. Rubbing his whiskers, he got up and walked over to the weasel.

"Hey," he said.

The weasel dropped the dumbbells, eyes wide. "Sorry," he said. "Did you need these? I can use something else, I'll use the smaller ones. I think these are too heavy anyway. Or maybe I'm doing it wrong. Anyway, I'll get out of your way. Sorry. Sorry."

"No, no." Rosco smiled, and sat on the bench. "I think you're starting a little heavy. It's more important to get the form right. Otherwise you're just wasting energy. Here, look." The dumbbell was light, for him, easy to show the right form for an arm curl. He ended up showing the weasel three more exercises and giving him some advice before walking back to Josh.

"Decided to become a charity worker?" the fox said acidly. "Don't waste your time. You know he won't stick with it."

Rosco shrugged. "Better than doing nothing at all," he said, and resumed his workout. Josh snorted, but his only comment was to tell Rosco to straighten his back more.

That evening, he biked back to the gym around seven, watching the sun sink in the sky, wondering in which direction the forest and lake lay. At ten after, he started pacing between the posts. Every gasoline rumble made him look up to see if it was Drew's Dunston. It never was.

What did he think, that WonderWolf just had every Friday evening free to spend with some no-name black wolf from the gym? The forms had made it very clear how dangerous it was for Rosco to associate with the hero, how important his identity was, how important it was to keep completely silent about, well, everything. And what could happen if he didn't.

He scuffled along the dirt outside the gym, dragging the claws of his hind feet. It had been neat, and it was something he'd always remember, but it was over. The part that made him sad

was that he'd really liked Drew. The guy had a great body, sure, but Rosco liked the personality underneath, the determination to make something of himself and the gentleness that made him so careful about hurting others. He wondered now what might be in WonderWolf's past. As a kid, had he been careless? Were there accidents that haunted him, things nobody could explain but him? Rosco would have liked to have one last good-bye, one chance to tell him that he was a nice guy, a good person, doing vastly more good than he could ever have to make up for.

"Hi."

He whirled at the familiar voice, but the only other person in the lot was a skunk walking out of the gym, who glanced his way and then walked on. "Hello?" he said slowly, raising his nose to the air. Drew's unique scent was nowhere to be smelled.

"Just talk normally. I can hear you."

"Drew? Where are you?"

"I'm a little ways away. I can project my voice and focus my hearing. Very handy for secret conversations."

"I remember," Rosco said. "Super-hearing and super-howling."

Drew sighed. "Yes."

"Sorry." The black wolf scanned the parking lot, then the roof of the gym, trying to see where the other wolf might be hiding. "So, um, is this how we're going to talk from now on?"

"You didn't get scared off by the forms?"

"Well..."

"They're mostly for your protection. Anyone who associates with me could be a target. Most people can't take care of themselves against a villain."

"What about that last form?"

There was a pause. "Yeah. That's kinda for our protection."

"I figured."

"It's never come to that. Nobody who's signed that form has ever been...we've never had to exercise that option."

Rosco leaned against a lamppost. "It's still kind of freaky," he said.

"I understand if you don't want to see me. Even just talking to me like this puts you in more danger."

The black wolf shook his head and grinned. "Danger, schmanger. I'm not gonna let a few forms stand between me and...I just didn't know if you would want to see me."



grey wolf
smiled broadly.

"You do have that cute
white patch I wouldn't mind seeing
more of."

"As long as you wear a Malakorite condom,"
Rosco said. He stepped into the range of the
wolf's arms and lifted a paw to the soft black
leather jacket, hanging open around the barrel-
thick torso.

Drew laughed, and reached out to pull the
black wolf close. "Maybe I'll put the team on
developing one."

Rosco nuzzled the broad chest, and then
lifted his muzzle to return the playful lick Drew
gave him on his whiskers. "This place kinda
sucks," he said. "Where should we go tonight?"

The blue eyes sparkled. "I know a neat little
café over in Chevarnier. Up for a trans-oceanic
flight?"

"What," Rosco said, climbing on behind
him, "we have to stay on this planet? Fine..."

Drew laughed again and kicked the bike to
life. Rosco held on tight to the broad form as
they sped through the gym parking lot, out to
the street and into the bright, wide world.

"Well," the
voice came softly over
the wind, "if you're comfortable..."

"I just said I was." Rosco looked around
again, and again saw nobody. "Seriously. Before
I knew who you were, I liked the guy I knew. A
lot."

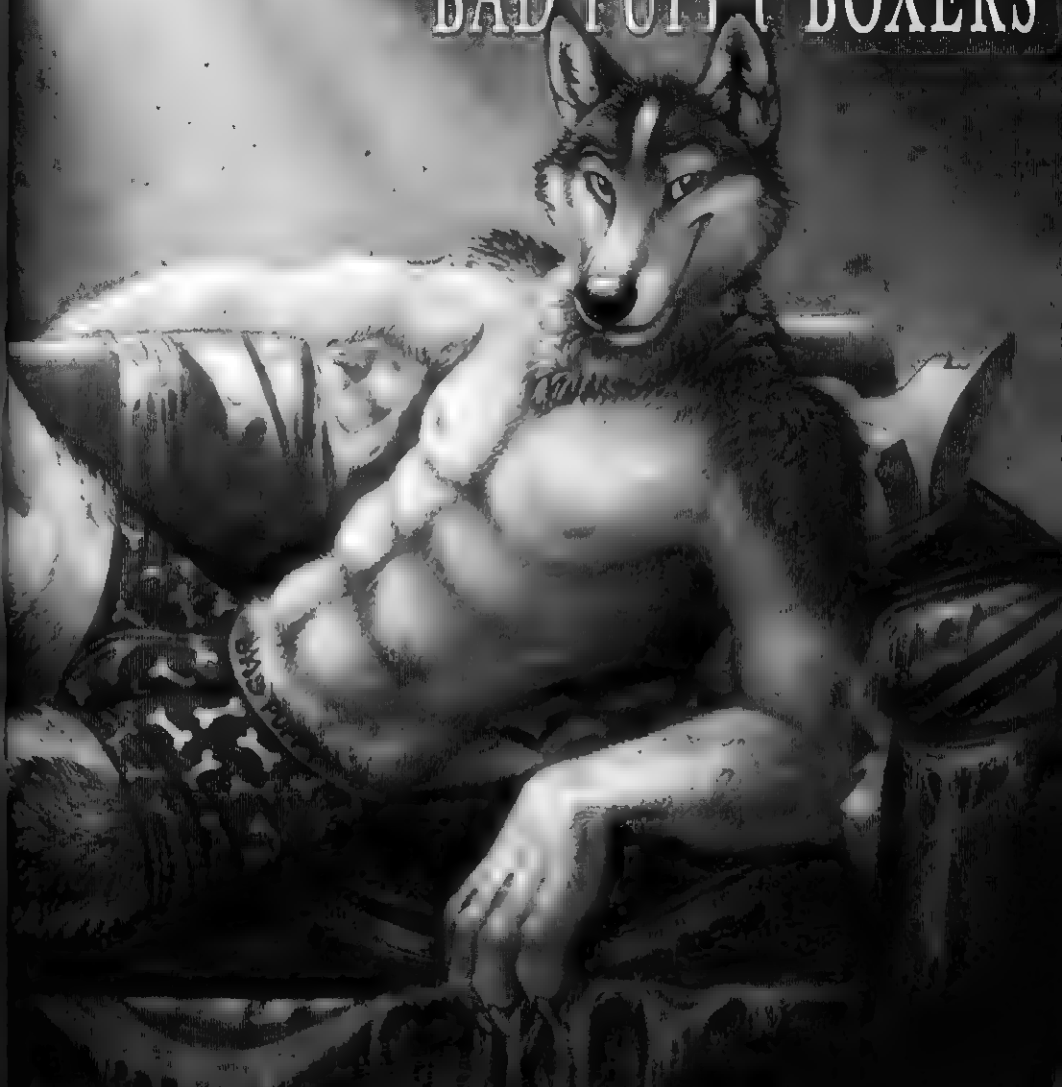
He heard a sigh, breeze ruffling his fur as
though WonderWolf had blown the sigh to him.
Instinctively, he turned in the direction of the
breeze and lifted his nose again, and this time
he thought he caught just the faintest scent.
"Really?" he heard.

"Yeah." He waved to a fox who was looking
curiously at him, and tapped his ear as though
he were on a cell phone. "Really."

From the street, a motorcycle turned into
the gym parking lot, a Dunston 450 with a mas-
sive wolf aboard. Rosco stood straighter as it
approached him, looking up into the deep blue
eyes of Drew WonderWolf as the bike sputtered
to a halt in front of him and sat idling. The large

LET US HELP MAKE YOU FEEL SO GOOD.

BAD PUPPY BOXERS



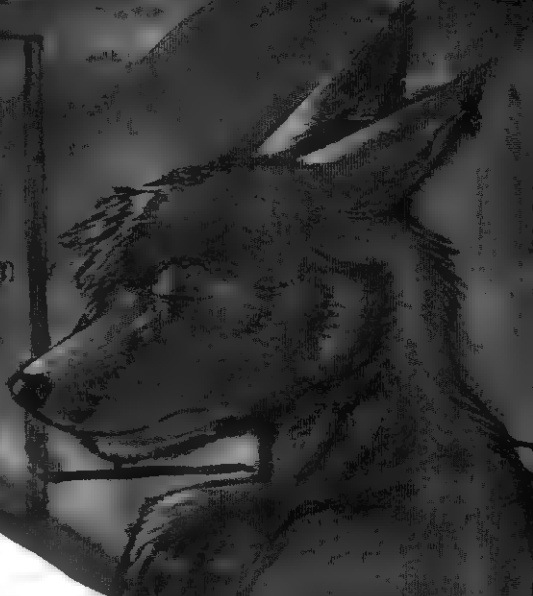
NO MATTER HOW BAD YOUR PUPPY IS,
HELL ALWAYS MAKE IT UP TO YOU.

DENVER • DNEY • MINNEAPOLIS • SAN FRANCISCO • SUHL
CHICAGO • BECKMAN • PITTSBURGH • BANGKOK

WELL, IT'S ALWAYS
SO NICE
TO SEE YOU
THERE.




MINE MINE,
ALL MINE.
WHENEVER
I WANT,
HOWEVER
I WANT.




PROPERTY.

BY A HUSKY



YOU NEVER
COMPLAIN.
YOU NEVER
SAY NO.
YOU WILL DO
EVERYTHING
AND ANYTHING
I WANT.

AND YOU ALWAYS
KNOW EXACTLY
WHAT I WANT.
YOU HAVE BEEN
TAUGHT WELL.



STAND UP. I WANT
YOU FACING
THE WALL.

BEST FIVE
HUNDRED
DOLLARS
I'VE EVER
SPENT.






THAT'S
RIGHT.



GOOD
BOY.



ALWAYS
TIGHT.



YOU
DEFINITELY
WERE BUILT
TO FUCK.




BUT IT'S
NOT LIKE
YOU
WOULD
UNDER-
STAND.



SUCH
A NICE
ASS.

BEST
FIVE
HUNDRED
BUCKS.



MODELS
LIKE YOU
AREN'T EASY
TO COME BY.
BUT YOU
ARE WORTH IT.
SIMPLY BECAUSE
YOU LOOK LIKE
HIM.



BUT YOU
ARE NOT
HIM.
YOU'RE
JUST MY
PROPERTY.

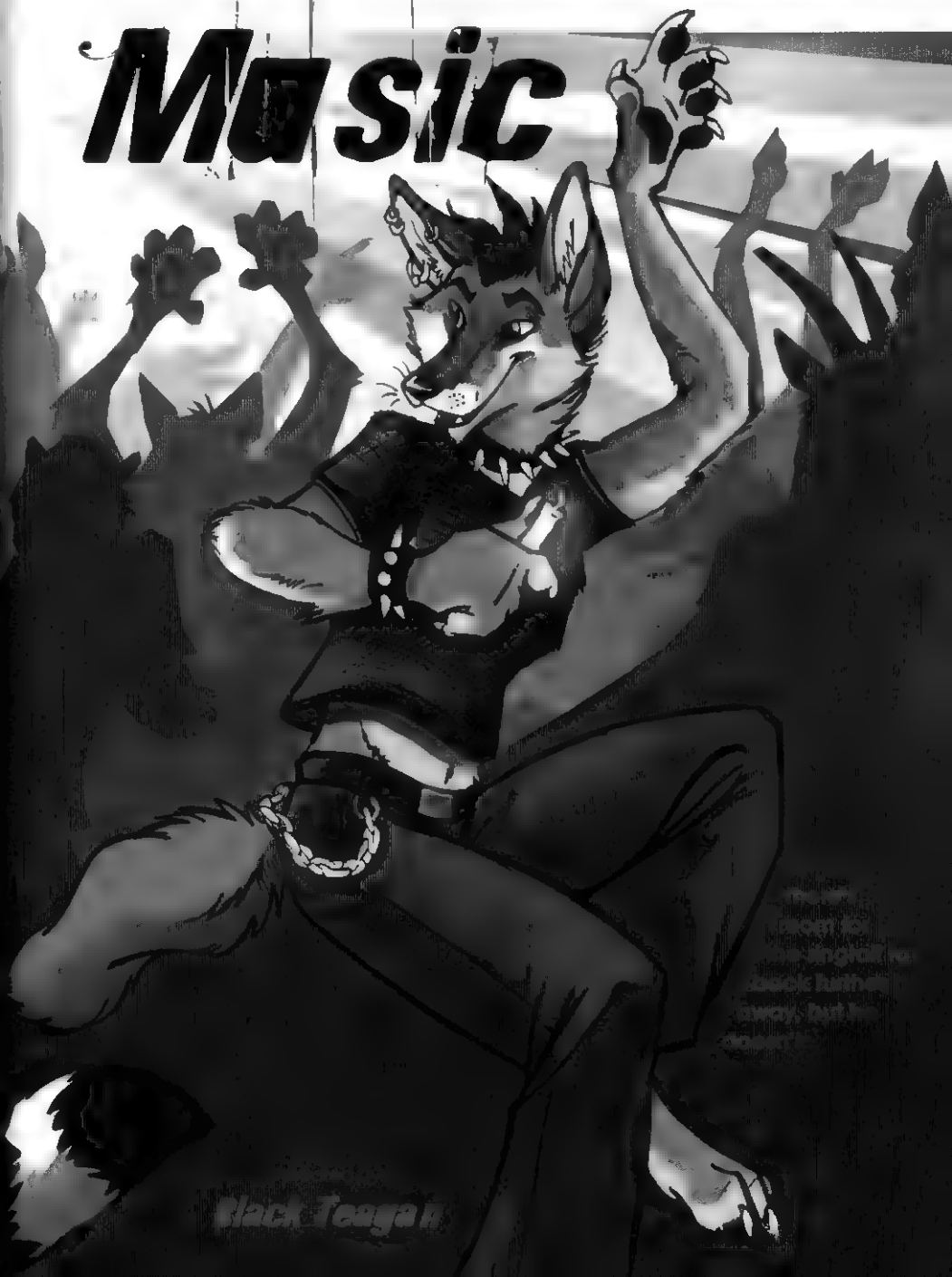
Candy

and



story by *K.M. Hirotsaki*

Music



Black Teagan

The ringtail is dancing. This is not his scene. It's not even his music: the DJ has been playing a set of synthpop; the ringtail prefers happy hardcore. It doesn't matter, though, because he's happy enough just to get to dance.

Even though it's not the sort of music he usually dances to, it's quite danceable. The rhythm is simple—maybe a little too simple, but fun nevertheless—and he bops right along, his long, two-toned tail twisting and swishing through the air behind him as he hops from foot to foot. He's got on his favorite pair of tennis shoes in his favorite color, purple, and those can be seen in little flashes every time the wide bottoms of his phat pants flip up as he springs around. This might not be his scene, but he has still come dressed in the style of a candy raver.

He looks so comfortable like that, too, with reflective stars and zig-zags running up the sides of his pants, a black t-shirt bedecked with a hefty sprinkling of glitter, and a bright blue visor that's tipped upward, the flashing lights dancing off the glossy trim. One of his cheeks has a star painted into the fur with wash-away purple dye, also prettied up with some more glitter. His forearms sport over a dozen candy bracelets between them, ones that glow in the dark and others that just sparkle in the ever-changing lights. It's a fashion that sets him apart from all the other dancers, but he's not the only one who stands out. The young people gathered at this dance come from different walks of life, from a variety of subcultures. They're here in town for the same reason the ringtail is: science fiction and comics.

At the end of the day, though, one can only delicately handle so many mint-condition books or swap so many rare TV specials caught on near-ancient VHS tapes before it's time to let loose and unwind. The hotel ballroom becomes a makeshift dance hall, and for those who aren't too tired from a day of walking, or for those who've prepped themselves by downing a few cups of late-night coffee or by having gotten themselves hopped up on more illicit substances, it's time to party.

The ringtail, for his part, is fueled by caffeine, sugar, and a general joie de vivre. He's all smiles, and he's just glad to be getting the chance to have fun with some like-minded folks in an environment that isn't what any of them normally get into. Besides, there's music, loud music, and he finds it hard to be anything

but happy when there's music playing. It's a red fox who's spinning the current synthpop set; he's got on a visor, too, but it's more of a bright purple as opposed to the ringtail's blue. From out on the floor, the ringtail can't catch his eye, but he appreciates the shared taste in fashion.

The beat and the rhythm of the music are repetitive, not at all hard to follow. That's okay, though. Sometimes it's more fun to dance without having to think too hard about it—to just lose yourself in it, following along with the good old one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four.

Step by step, foot to foot. It's really not complicated in the least.

Left, right, left, right. One-eighty turn. Left, right.

Left, right, left, right. Ninety degree turn. Left, right.

Rinse, repeat. That right there gets the ringtail through the next two songs, no problem. He doesn't stay in place, though. With each hop he lets himself drift in this direction or that, buzzing around the dance floor with no real direction, occasionally scoping out some of the other dancers. Just under half of them are wearing one or more brightly-colored glowstick necklaces. Many of them are brandishing glowsticks in their paws—some with skill, some without. Some of them look self-conscious about it. Some of them look self-conscious just because they're dancing at all.

Most of them aren't actually doing that bad. It's an easy and familiar rhythm, after all, and so long as you're moving in time with that, it's hard to go wrong. Besides, it's all casual, and nobody's really showing off the fancy moves. The ringtail could, if he wanted to, but in this crowd that would just draw attention and make him look like he was grandstanding. In the candy raver crowd, he's just run of the mill, but most of the people in this sci-fi crowd have probably never seen a raver go at it full-blast.

More people should dance, the ringtail thinks. Just in general. For a lot of people, the ones who don't usually dance, it takes a lot of courage to hop out onto a dance floor in a room full of peers and strangers. These are the people who don't realize how fun and liberating it is once you just dare to give it a try.

The ringtail spies a mink girl over by one of the speakers. She's wearing a fluorescent pink plasticskirt and a t-shirt with the word "SÜPER" written in glitter right across her chest. Both of

her forearms have glowstick necklaces twisted into figure-eights around them, to serve as makeshift bracelets. Her feet and lower legs are covered in a pair of oversized moon boots. She makes brief eye contact with the ringtail. They share a smile. She appears to mouth the word "Hi!" to him, but he isn't sure. They drift apart after that.

The fox's music suddenly swings up in tempo. Immediately, the ringtail's pulse quickens to compensate. His movements quicken, too, naturally. He hops about like he's hyper, and most of the other dancers follow suit. Some of them flutter off of the floor, taking seats, looking too exhausted or just too embarrassed to keep it up. Still more people take the opportunity to jump onto the floor, the music finally getting their attention enough to warrant dancing to it.

Now it's left, right, half-twist, jump back, right, left, full twist, left, right, left, right, jump up, left, right, half-twist, and all over again.

The lights flicker and flicker. A dance floor full of young people of every species imaginable is captured in super-repeating freeze-frame. Glowsticks and reflectors and blinking LED's leave blurred trails in a dozen different colors as the dancers give in to the frantic pace of the pounding tones of synthpop. It's happy and it's jaunty and the ringtail hits his second wind before his first has even deserted him.

For a second, the ringtail feels his tail brush against someone's leg, and he's moving so fast that he doesn't have time to course-correct before he bumps up against that someone's hip. He spins around and waves a paw in apology.

The someone is a coyote. He's done up like a goth punk—again, not the sort of fellow who'd normally be dancing to synthpop, but what the hell, that's what they're playing, right? The fur between his ears is spiked up into a purple-blue dyed mohawk. His torso is crisscrossed with a mix of black and blue-green fishnet, torn strategically. He's got legit DIY style, so the ringtail at least appreciates the ethic of the aesthetic. The coyote waves back and tells the ringtail no worries about the collision.

They both hop back so that they're not in danger of knocking into one another again, but the ringtail keeps his eye on the coyote and the coyote keeps his eye on the ringtail. The coyote isn't at all sheepish to be reveling in music well outside his genre of choice. The ringtail feels something of a kindred spirit in that, just based

on attitude. There's room for the ringtail to back further away, but he doesn't. He actually dances a little closer.

The coyote doesn't mind at all. Their eyes are locked on one another now—well, aside from the moments where one or both of them are in mid-turn, since the music is dictating how they move. That's the fun part about infectiously simple music, really. The ringtail is a little jealous that his own long, flexible tail can't wag like a canine's, because if he could wag it, he would. Not that it would even be apparent, given how swift and frenzied the rest of his body's movements are, but whatever. It would just feel natural.

There's a spiked leather wristband around the coyote's left wrist, but there isn't a matching one on the right. So the ringtail reaches out and takes the coyote's right paw in his own. It's a quick grab, but the coyote sees it coming and lets it happen. He looks confused, but he allows the ringtail to do his thing, which is to roll one of his own handmade pony bead bracelets from his wrist onto the coyote's.

With a chuckle, the coyote says that it doesn't really match the rest of his getup, but the ringtail just giggles and tells him that it looks cute on him anyway. It's at that word "cute" that the coyote's eyes light up in a way that the ringtail recognizes very well. They release paws and go back to dancing, the fluorescent bracelet now adorning the coyote's right wrist indeed looking out-of-place, which makes the ringtail giggle again. Again, the coyote doesn't mind.

The fox's next song is a somewhat crude mashup that's clearly just meant to bridge the gap from the synthpop set he's been playing and the electropop it starts fading into. The ringtail's enthusiasm dips just slightly at that, since he was finally getting into a nice, trance-like groove with the prior set of music, and he doesn't like having his groove thrown out of whack. The coyote sees the ringtail's change in demeanor and nods with his head, suggesting that they both get off the dance floor, and the ringtail follows. He's been dancing for a while now, anyway, and as soon as he stops his bopping and hopping, he realizes just how much his feet appreciate the rest.

Sitting in one of the rows of chairs along the wall of the ballroom-turned-dance hall, the coyote and the ringtail share brief introductions. They're both out-of-towners, of course,

just here for the convention, both staying in the hotel, both here all weekend, and both having a very good time, even if the music isn't a perfect mesh with what they'd prefer.

The coyote hesitates, and then asks the ringtail if he really meant what he said when he called the coyote cute, and the ringtail responds by telling him that, yes, he thinks he's very cute, at least for a goth punk. That makes the coyote give the ringtail a soft punch in the shoulder, and he retorts by saying that the ringtail isn't so bad-looking himself, for a candy raver.

In response to that, the ringtail leans in, kisses the coyote on the cheek, and tells him thank you.

Flustered, the coyote changes the subject and asks the ringtail if he really makes all of his bracelets by himself. The ringtail says that, yeah, he makes most of them, but some of them are ones that he's collected from his fellow candykids back home. In return, the ringtail asks the coyote if any of the piercings he has were ones he gave himself, and the coyote shakes his head pretty vehemently and insists that that sort of thing is pretty dangerous and stupid. The ringtail nods and says that he knows a few people who have done that sort of thing, and they both agree, with a chuckle, that just because some things are dangerous and stupid doesn't always keep people from doing them, even the people who are smart enough to know better.

There's another moment of awkward silence as the two of them stop talking just as there's a brief break in the music. The ringtail pets along the inside of the coyote's forearm and asks if he's had enough dancing for one night, and after searching the ringtail's eyes, the coyote says that, yeah, he thinks he has, but he's not really all that tired, and so if they wanted to go do something else...

...and the ringtail says, yeah, sure, something else might be nice.

So they leave the ballroom and they trot on down the hallway, passing other sci-fi geeks heading in the opposite direction, heading toward the dance, some looking drunk, some looking stoned, but all of them looking like they're just hoping to have a good time.

There's a bit of a wait for the elevator at this time of night, with all these out-of-town attendees lining up to go upstairs and go back to their respective rooms for sleep or more drinking or whatever the order of the night may

be. It's not too bad, and it allows for more small talk, more discussion about what sort of comics the other likes, what TV shows that they watch, which one's they're following now and which ones they'll make a point to catch up on when they're released on DVD.

The elevator comes and they ride it up to the seventeenth floor, where the coyote's room is, stopping about eight times on the way up, but there's still no rush. Finally, they get there.

The candy raver ringtail and the goth punk coyote disappear into the hotel room together.

The coyote starts by trying to say that he doesn't usually do this sort of thing, but the ringtail quickly cuts him off with a yeah, me neither, before silencing the canine with a kiss. Of course, the coyote kisses back, but it's not a long one, because the ringtail ends up pulling back so that he can giggle some more.

Paws start to wander. The coyote's wander first, stroking through the ringtail's namesake appendage before groping and squeezing at his little butt. The ringtail squeaks, lifts up onto tiptoe, and kisses the coyote again. He wraps his skinny arms around the coyote's shoulders and holds on tight, tongue brushing tongue, lips locked nice and tight.

They pull away, both of them gasping a little. The ringtail can feel the thickening ridge between the coyote's legs pressing against his hip, so he offers to help with that, and though he's clearly embarrassed at the way things are moving so fast, the coyote scoots a step backwards and lets the ringtail open up his too-tight black pants.

First, the ringtail gets the belt buckle and zipper open, and then he pushes the coyote on the chest so that he stumbles backwards, yelps, and lands with his ass on the edge of the bed. Grinning and giggling some more, the ringtail kneels down between the coyote's feet and tugs the zipper down. No underwear. The ringtail clicks his tongue and chastises his new friend for being naughty. The coyote says that, to be fair, he wasn't expecting that anyone was going to be opening up his pants today, but the ringtail doesn't respond, at least not with words.

His paw ventures into those open pants and tugs the full, plump sheath free. The coyote's not a huge, broad-shouldered guy, but he's sporting a decent package. Not that the ringtail is a size-queen or anything, but he at least appreciates nicely-sized equipment, which he shows by wagging his eyebrows at the canine

as his paw tugs up and down at the fuzzy holder that feels so taut that it's almost like it might burst apart at the seams while he's holding it. Because he's a little naughty, that only makes the ringtail tease even more.

It's the coyote's plaintive whining that gets the ringtail to call off the playfully-cruel teasing. His careful paw squeezes softly and tugs the coyote's sheath down, freeing the trapped shaft within, inch by glistening pink inch. It's surprisingly bright, but part of that might just be the effect of the hotel room's gaudy artificial lighting. There's a clear and steady run of drizzle down along the underside of that spear of pink, and the ringtail's tongue catches it at the bottom and trails all the way up to the top. Now the underside of the coyote's shaft is still glistening; the fluid has just been replaced, is all.

Before continuing, the ringtail looks up into the coyote's face, and takes the lack of protest as assent to continue. His soft, warm, glitter-glossed lips wrap around the slow-leaking tip and seal down. His nostrils twitch. The strong scent is a bit overpowering, because he's not used to canines; his last two boys -

friends (well, technically, one of them was only a kinda-sorta boyfriend) were both felines. It makes him pause for a moment, but he soon gets used to it, and then brings his head down a little further. It's very musky, sure, but nothing he can't handle, and after a while it's actually kind of pleasant in its own right.

The coyote certainly finds everything pleasant, but that's the fun of being on the receiving end. After a few long, slow passes of the ringtail's snout, there's finally enough saliva for the smaller fellow to bob up and down much, much more smoothly. He does so, too, without putting in too much more teasing. He's gone down on guys before, so he knows what he's doing, and he can tell that the pent-up coyote isn't going to be one for unnecessarily prolonging things.

Which isn't to say that the ringtail is just in a messy, sloppy rush, because it's anything but that. He's moving at a pretty steady clip, and after a while he realizes that his head is moving up and down in a rhythm very similar to one of those synthpop tracks from downstairs. His lips twist into a smile and he stops sucking just long enough to chuckle. He feels a bit of a tingle of his own, just down around his crotch. The coyote grunts out a question, but the ringtail ignores it and just goes back to work, happily letting the tune play in his head, working his muzzle in time with the beat of the imaginary music. Hey, music that isn't happy hardcore actually is still good for something.

The coyote reaches down, strokes along the rim of the ringtail's ear, and then traces along the top of his visor, which hides the actual action from the coyote's view. He starts to try to take the obscuring headgear off, but then he leaves it there, because there's



something hot about getting a blow job that you can't see.

He hasn't had a blow job in a while, though, and soon enough, he's panting hard and heavy to let the ringtail know that he's close. The ringtail is still having a lot of fun, though, and while he doesn't want to be evil, he knows the coyote will appreciate it all in the end if he prolongs things just a little bit more. He tilts his head to the side, showing off part of his face—just one mischief-filled eye peeking back up—as he slowly pulls his muzzle off and starts to work with his tongue alone. The coyote whines even harder, and his tail thumps the bed.

The ringtail starts to kiss the coyote's shaft at various points, planting a series of cute little pecks up along the twitching, solid flesh. His tongue starts to wrap and curl in progressively longer licks, each one timed out to a beat that only the ringtail can hear, and each one drawing out a different tone of whimper from the coyote. It's all rather delightful, for both of them, and when the twitching gets to be too erratic, the ringtail slides his snout back around the coyote's cock and resumes a more proper sucking.

After that, it's less than two measures of the ringtail's mental song before the coyote fires into his mouth. The ringtail almost doesn't catch it, because it comes on pretty strong, but his paw tightens around the bulging knot at the base of the spurting shaft and holds on. There's no time to savor things, though; he needs to just keep swallowing and swallowing until the coyote's climax is through, which isn't too long, thankfully, but it is awfully intense.

The ringtail then comes up for air and theatrically makes a show of catching his breath. The coyote chuckles at that, with the sort of lazy, post-orgasmic giddiness that makes the ringtail smile. In truth, the ringtail is a little short of breath, and his own pulse is racing in the aftermath of that shared moment of sexual fulfillment.

As the coyote uses the edge of his sheet to clean himself off, the ringtail feels a quick buzz through his thigh. He notices, sheepishly, that what he thought was a tingle of excitement earlier was actually his cell phone going off. He flips it open, and then shakes his head and chuckles.

The coyote asks what's up, and the ringtail clicks his phone shut and says that the tiger he's sharing his room with locked himself out, and so he needs to run and let him back in. The coyote smiles and says okay, but he looks like he doesn't believe it, so the ringtail offers to show him the



message, but coyote insists that he does actually believe him. The ringtail starts to collect himself, and he says that he'd swing back by afterwards, but he knows that it's kind of late, and inwardly, he knows that it would be a little awkward.

So the coyote says not to worry about it, but while the ringtail is in the middle of texting the tiger to tell him to just wait for five more minutes, he gets an idea. He tells the coyote to give him his phone number, and he'll text him in the morning so that they can meet and grab breakfast together, maybe meet some of their mutual friends that they came to town with. Not for the first time that night the coyote looks a little hesitant, but then he says, yeah, sure, okay, and gives the ringtail his number.

The ringtail goes back to his room and sees the tiger sitting up against the door. The cat gets up, the ringtail swipes the electronic card key, and they go inside. If the ringtail still smells like coyote, his roommate doesn't say anything. The ringtail asks what the tiger was up to tonight; the tiger says he was at the dance, but neither of them apparently saw one another. That's okay, because there were a lot of people there.

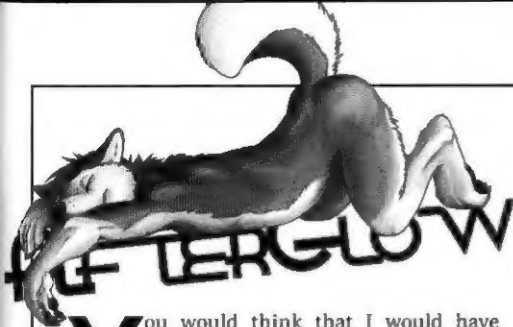
The caffeine wears off, the sugar rush ends, and before long, the ringtail falls asleep, still in his clothes.

The next morning, the ringtail gets up, makes sure that the tiger gets out of bed, too, and he texts the coyote. The coyote texts back, and they agree to meet in the lobby in a half hour.

When they do meet up in lobby a little over a half an hour later, the coyote is still wearing the ringtail's kandy bracelet, even though it really does clash with the goth punk clothes.

Animal Magnetism





You would think that I would have learned by now that putting this publication together requires much, much more time than even my most pessimistic inclinations lead me to believe. Actually, no, I have learned this lesson over and over again. What I consistently fail to do is to apply it. *This year will be the year I pull it all together*, I think to myself with each volume, and volume 5 was no different. Once again, we're up to the last minute getting this off to print, and the fault can be readily spread around to many individuals, but it falls on myself most of all.

I could go into much more detail here than I have room for telling you all about the joys and challenges of putting this volume together, but it is perhaps for the best that I avoid too much whining. The issue is here, and hopefully on time. (As I type this, there is still hope of that.) And I have had some time to apply some of my creativity towards a fun and exciting layout once again. Sure, I wish I'd had another whole month to tweak things here, adjust things there, but it's too late for that now. Our writers and poets

have given us a great mix of stories for you to read, and with the help of our illustrators, these stories have come to dramatic life. Our comic artists have defied the odds and come up with graphic tales that are both entertaining and striking, despite the amount of work needed to pull them off in a short amount of time. (You would think artists would learn, but the return of Blotch to our list of comic offerings seems to indicate otherwise...) And with this issue we bring in a new idea with some amusing twists on advertising. This all will have to make up for any deficiencies in layout bedazzlement.

For those of you wondering what happened to my associate editors from the last issue—*Did I fire them for doing a poor job?* Absolutely not. When I decided to bite the bullet and get this volume rolling, my life was too busy with work and other things to give me more than a few moments here and there to get everything done, and it just wouldn't have worked to coordinate my schedule with two other very busy writer/editors. Whether I made the right choice or not could certainly be debated—I slipped enough times in my organization skills to cause some problems that nearly derailed the process more than once. Associate editors would have at least given me someone else to blame! But with luck, maybe next fall (sometime after Eurofurence) I'll finally make good on my goal to start volume 6 early and avoid the last-minute crunch that seems to have become our trademark.

HEAT

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